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The WAY OF THE PROUD
A Rangeland Novelet
By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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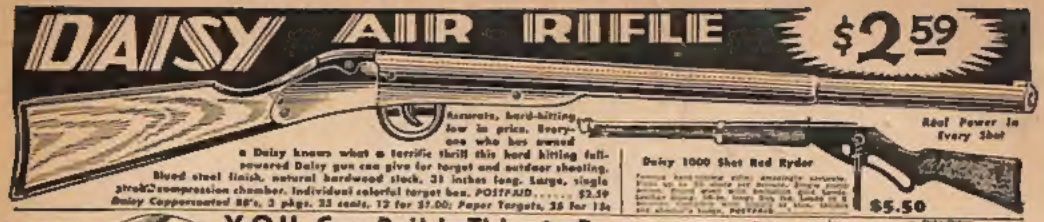

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THRILLING RANCH STORIES

VOL. XL, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION September, 1949

Featured Rangeland Novelet

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By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

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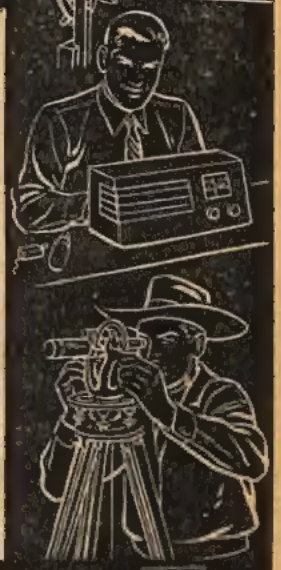

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Around the Branding Fire

A Department for Readers Conducted by TEX BROWN

SURE, the pueblo o' Taos, New Mexico, is worth seein'. There's a town o' Taos, too, in case you didn't know. That's the place where Kit Carson met and married his wife—a beautiful Mexican senorita. I'll tell you about that a little later. Right now I gotta answer a inquiry about the place itself.

Taos lies about a hundred miles north o' Santa Fe in that state o' wonderful scenery and hist'ry—New Mexico. After leavin' Santa Fe you ride through the famous Flechando Pass over a fine automobile road which leads on through the Sangre de Cristo (blood o' Christ) Range, and thence to Taos. That's one o' the oldest towns in the West and is packed with hist'ry o' Indians, white men, and the Spanish Conquistadores.

Turbulent Years

Taos was first inhabited by Indians. Later a few whites, mostly Spaniards, come into the place and settled. Pepe, the leader o' the Indian inhabitants, headed a uprisin' and the redskins killed most of the whites. That was about 1680.

Then in the year 1692 De Vargas rode in with his men and whipped hell outa them Injuns. He returned again the same year and forced the Indians back into the hills. A few years later the redskins sneaked in and murdered all the priests, who they hated like pizen, and twenty-five white folks. Besides hatin' the whites, these Taos Indians were constantly fightin' with other tribes—the Utes and Comanches. The Taos red men are Apaches.

So, you see, the original Taos inhabitants fought, bled, and many died, to hold their homes. And they're still there, livin' today 'bout as they did a thousand years ago, except that they now live peaceably with all.

The Indians wan't the only ones who give trouble at Taos. After New Mexico become a state o' the Union the Mexican inhabitants give trouble. They rose up in revolt in 1847 and murdered Governor Charles Bent in his sleep. And they killed a heap o' white men in a hard battle at Turley's Mills. Their revolt was put down by the U. S. Army, many folks gettin' killed in the process.

Picturesque Indians

Today, the Indians live in their pueblos near the town of Taos. And they're sure a picturesque people in their homes and mode o' life. They still dress in their colorful blankets, and wear their black hair long.

There's actually three pueblos instead o' one as at many Indian settlements. There's twin communal dwellin's, pueblo style, made o' adobe. They're five stories high, with ladders leadin' up from story to story. There you'll see the Mission of San Geronimo, ancient, picturesque, and worth yore while. And these Taos Indians are not shiftless people. They're industrious, and about the most progressive redskins found today. They make pottery, weave, and have their little farms.

For the past thirty years or so Taos has been a sort o' mecca for artists paintin' the Indians and desert scenes. There's a sort o' colony o' these paint daubers. Some mighty fine Western scenes are painted there.

Taos is a sight you won't forget in a hurry. Those old hills, often spotted with bright sunlight and indigo blue cloud-shadows, the little river, the communal dwellings rearin' up five stories high, and the Indians theirselves in their colorful native dress.

And it's here, in the old cemetery o' Taos, that you'll find the graves o' Kit Carson, cele-

brated scout, and his wife, the beloved Josefa. It was here they were married and lived for many years.

Now Josefa was Kit's third and last wife. He'd had two others, both Indian women, but he was married to Josefa by the priest. The other two he took, after the custom of frontiersmen of the day, by Indian tribal rite.

His first wife was a Indian girl o' the Arapahoe tribe. He met and fell in love with her while he was at Bent's Fort. To get the girl he had to fight a duel with a ruffian. Kit killed his opponent, and married the girl. This little Indian maid, named Waa-nibe (Grass Singing), he called Alice.

He was a young hunter and trapper in those days—a hard life and a wild one. Alice often went with him, cooking for him, taking care of his clothing, etc., on these trips, into wildernesses. He had a band o' men workin' with him, called "Carson's men."

A Rangeland Tragedy

Kit took his wife to stay in the safety o' Bent's Fort for the birth o' their baby. It was a little girl and Kit named her Adeline. Kit went on to Fort Hall and there become dangerously sick. Word of his condition was brought to his wife. With true devotion she mounted a horse and rode to her husband—a twelve hour ride. This great exertion brought on a severe fever, and she died in a few days.

She was greatly mourned by the rough, honest Kit who was devoted to her. Her baby was only two weeks old at the time o' her death. After a few years Kit took his little daughter to Independence, Missouri, where relatives cared for her. She grew up to be a beautiful girl and married a St. Louis merchant.

His second venture in matrimony was with a Cheyenne Indian girl. Her name was Making-out-the-Road. He took her with her family's consent. But Making-of-the-Road had a mighty violent temper, and they separated. Soon the girl married an Indian and raised a good family, it's said.

Guide for Fremont

Aboard a steamer on the upper Missouri after a trip East Kit met General Fremont. The General hired Carson as guide to his expedition, payin' him a hundred dollars a month—a whale of a salary for a guide at that

(Continued on page 87)

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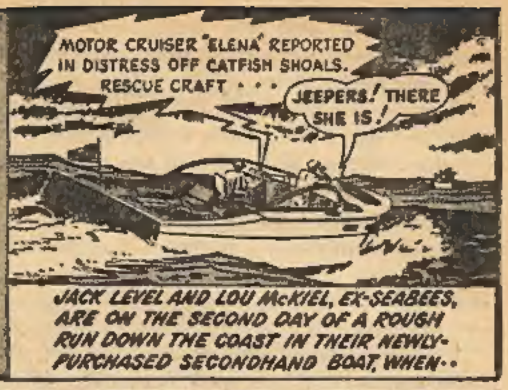

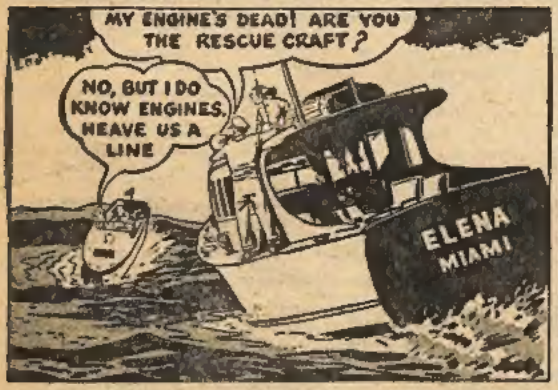

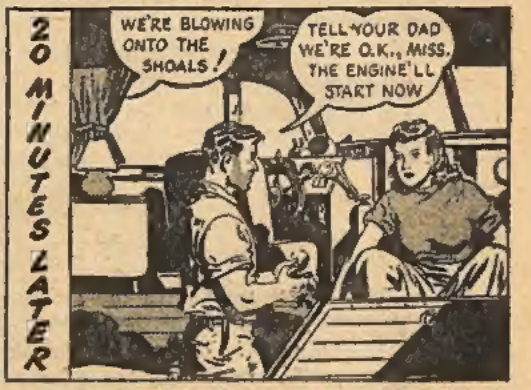

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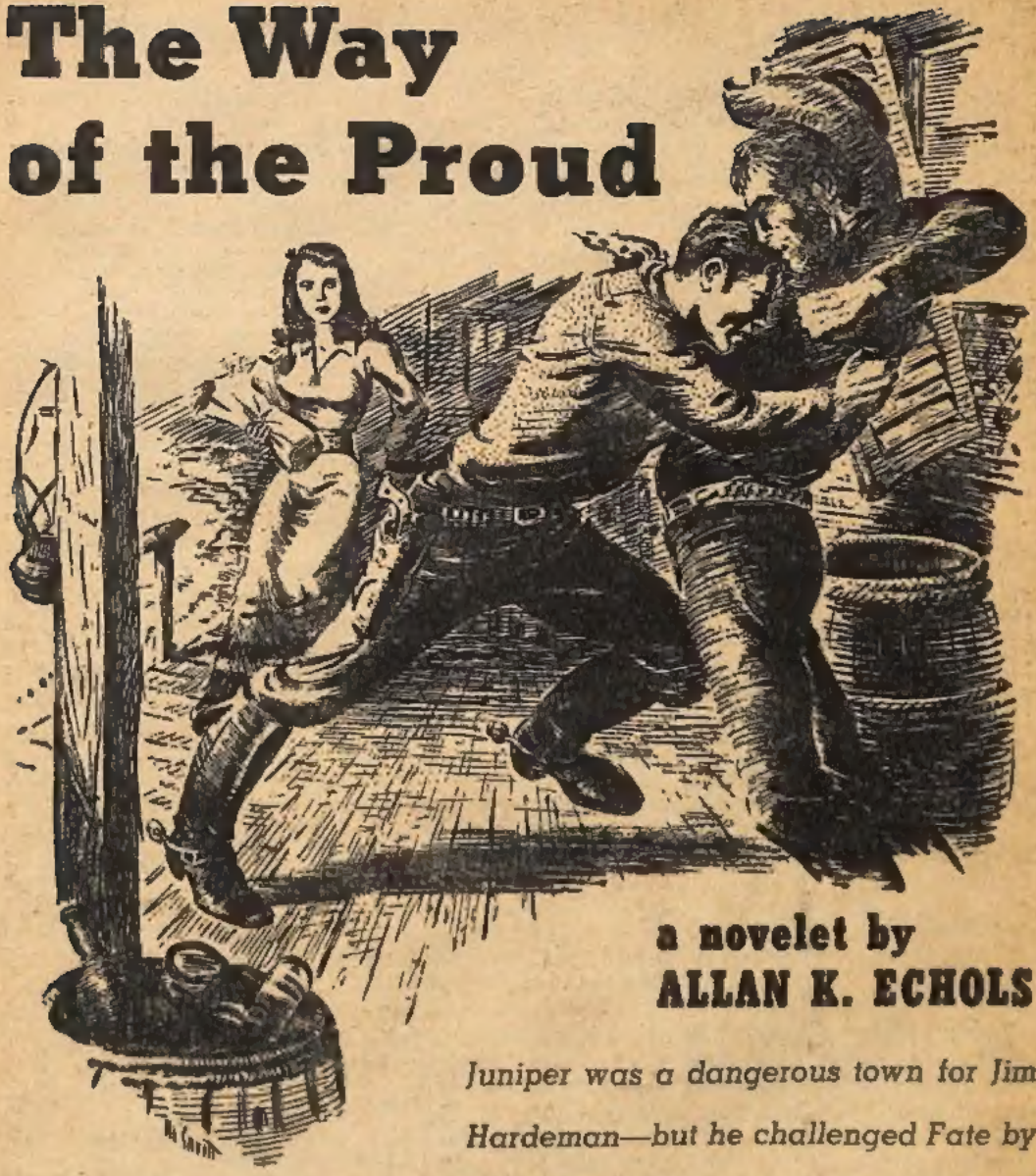


a novelet by
ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Juniper was a dangerous town for Jim Hardeman—but he challenged Fate by taking on a lawdog's job right there!

CHAPTER I

The Long Night

JIM HARDEMAN had struck half a dozen matches to look anxiously at the old alarm clock on the chair beside the bunk since midnight. Hearing the hoofbeats out in the darkness, he struck another. It was three o'clock.

He listened tensely. It might be his brother Bud and Billy Strode. But again it might be some of the riffraff that had come into Juniper, now that the railroad was starting to push on down into Texas. The ragtown which had sprung up around the railhead had brought its

share of cutthroats, gamblers and plain and fancy thieves. And Hardeman had money on him.

He sat up in the darkness and continued to listen, and an instinctive warning of danger crept over him. It could not be both his kid brother and Strode, for there was only one horse. He slipped into his levis and boots and went to the door without making a light, and picked up the rifle leaning against the doorframe.

The horseman came to a stop twenty feet away from the house, and Hardeman could not make him out in the darkness. He cradled the rifle in his arms.

"Yeah?" he called. His nerves were tight after his quarrel with Bud.

"It's me—Strode," the horseman called out, and slid off his animal. "Put that gun away."

Strode could not have seen the gun, but he knew Hardeman. He came to the door unsteadily, reached out and caught it for support, and then sighed, as though he had completed a difficult job.

Billy Strode was reeling drunk. Hardeman cursed him under his breath, for he had given the man orders to stay sober and stick by the kid. The fear tightened his muscles, made his voice sharp.

"Where's Bud?"

Billy Strode bowed his head and spat, taking a long time about it. "You should of gone to town with him. Then it wouldn't have happened," he said finally.

Hardeman grabbed the man by the arm and tried to shake the information out of him. "What do you mean? What happened?"

"Silver Storr and him had some words. Silver beat him to the draw. If you'd been there—"

"How bad? Is he all right?"

"Well, no. Bud didn't have a chance. He's at the undertaking parlor."

The shock of the news made Hardeman brutal. He grabbed the man by the arm and collar and pushed him into the house. He lit the lamp and shoved Strode into a bunk and stood over him with his fists clenched on his hips.

"Now talk straight!" he snapped. "Just what happened?"

Strode's head was bowed and he ran long fingers through his hair, not looking up at Hardeman.

"He tried to see that Winslow girl again."

THE name sent its stab through Jim Hardeman, the old grief reinforcing the new until he was sick and shaken with it. Her face had been with him through this night's vigil as it was always.

In the brief spaces betwen Billy Strode's halting words, he saw in bright flashes the whole minor tragedy of his love for Mary Winslow.

He saw himself, nerved up to ask her the important question, riding to town, combed, curried and slicked like a prize horse and just about as nervous. There was a little stilted speech rehearsing itself in his mind over and over again like a record on one of those new-fangled gramophones. And wishfully, he already saw Mary's lovely face light up in joy, saw her graceful form sway toward him and her lips tilt up for his kiss. . . .

Only it hadn't worked that way. For when he strode up the walk to her door and raised his hand to knock, he had been able to see quite clearly through the window, see Mary Winslow in the act of kissing his brother Bud. There was no mistaking the adoring look that Bud Hardeman bent upon the girl. Nor to Jim's eyes, no mistake either in the laughing, affectionate face turned up to Bud's.

So that settled that. Jim Hardeman tucked his little rehearsed speech and his hopes and dreams carefully away and set his face into straight unbetraying illness. If his kid brother loved Mary Winslow and she loved him that was the way it had to be, so far as Jim Hardeman was concerned. If anyone had told Jim Hardeman that he was being over-protective as far as his reckless wild kid brother went, and that therefore maybe some of the recklessness was Jim's own fault, he would only have shaken a

puzzled head. He was doing the best he knew.

So he kept his own counsel and rode his own way alone. Only he wasn't quite alone. Mary Winslow's smiling, lovely face rode with him wherever he went. He was never quite free of it, even now, with the sharper pangs of Strode's news tearing at him.

"—she wouldn't see him," Strode was saying, "because he'd been drinking, so

JIM HARDEMAN

he hit for the K. C. saloon and started lapping it up. I tried to keep him from it like you said."

"Yeah, I can see that," Hardeman said tightly.

"Well, he got a bottle and went over to the stud table and started playing, still drinking. He was sore at the world. Then he caught Silver Storr dealing seconds and he got up and turned the table over and called him names. Storr shot him dead."

"And where were you when Storr was gunning him down?"

"Me? Why, I tried to break it up, but what chance did I have? Rainey May and Matt Schultz both had me covered. I can't outshoot every gunny Durbin's got in the house, can I?"

"Not when you're leaning over the bar with a snootful of liquor," Hardeman answered coldly.

He reached over and took the man's gun out of its holster and broke out the cylinder. He looked at the lamp through the gunbarrel and the bore of the weapon was shiny. He jammed the gun back into Strode's holster.

"You never fired a shot," he said with burning scorn. "You yellow, liquor-soaking, worthless excuse for a man! Get out of my sight, and stay out. I ought to wrap your own gunbarrel around your neck!" His voice rose. "Get out, I say."

Hardeman's blistering words slashed through the whiskey fumes in Strode's brain and he came to his feet, unsteady, but much more sober. He stood with exaggerated dignity, holding to the post of the bunk.

"You owe me money," he said. "Two weeks' wages."

"See me in town and I'll give it to you."

"I want it now. I couldn't help that brother of yours, or I would, and I won't stand for you talking to me like that. Give me my money. And don't say you ain't got it. You sold your saloon for cash."

Hardeman searched his pockets and found ten dollars in silver. He threw it on the bunk, unbuttoned his undershirt and took his chamois money-belt from around his waist. He opened a pocket of it and produced another ten dollar gold piece and a five.

He saw the blow coming, but with both hands occupied, he wasn't in time to avoid it. Billy Strode's gun came down on his head with the force of a fence-rail hammer and knocked him sprawling to the floor. He lay there unconscious for half an hour.

AS HE gradually regained consciousness he had an aching head and a feeling that the world had crashed down on him in more ways than one. He pulled himself up to the bunk and sat on it holding his head while he tried to remember what had happened. As the parts of the picture came back to him

a cold horror gripped him.

He looked dazedly around the room, knowing what he would find. Billy Strode was gone, and with him the money-belt containing the four thousand dollars he had got for the sale of his saloon in Juniper. But this seemed unimportant now beside the robbery.

As Hardaman fired Storr moved back toward the porch rolling

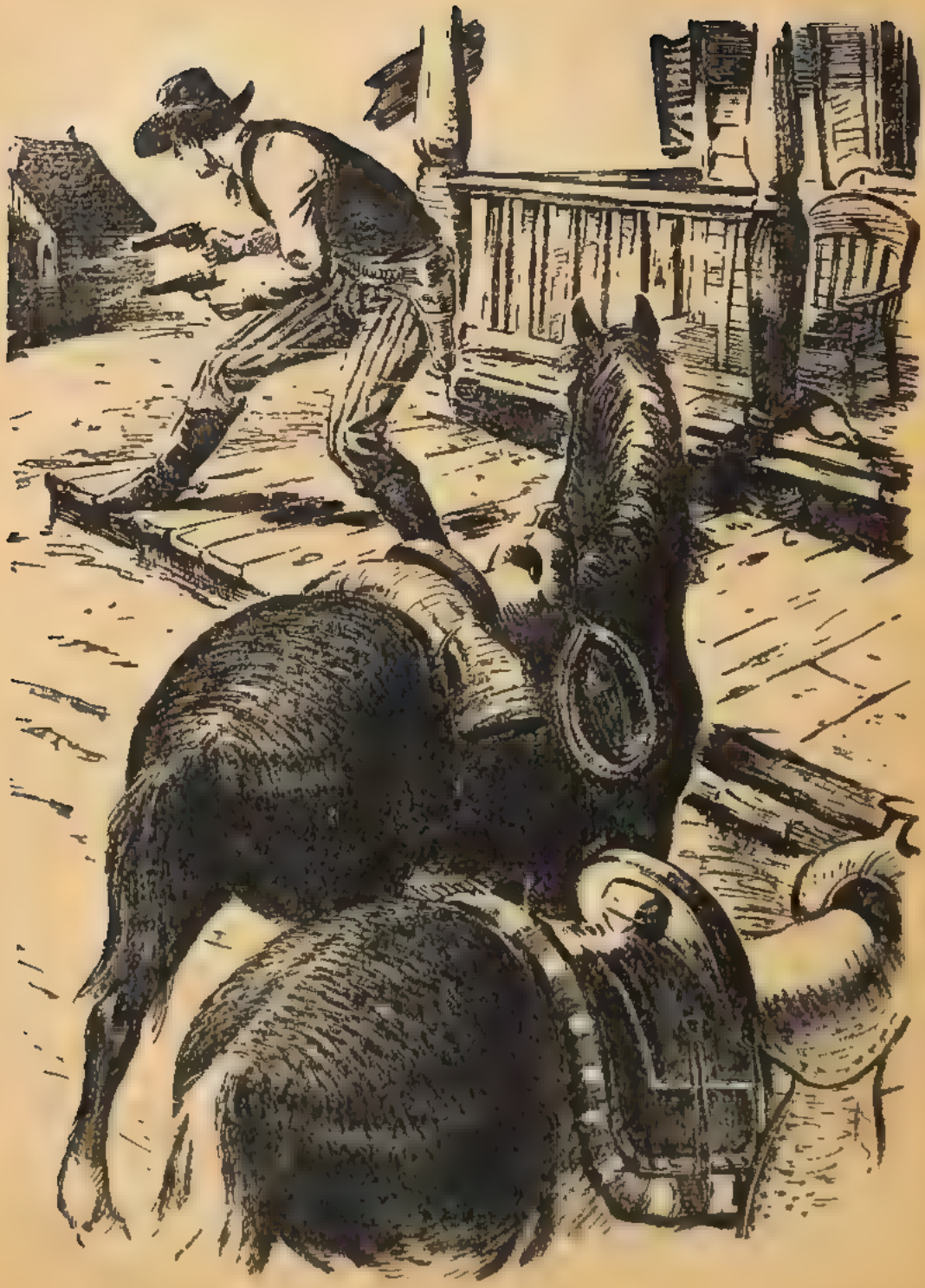
Bud was dead, if Strode could be believed. Killed by a gun-slinging gambler, by one of the crowd that had drifted into Juniper with the new construction on the railroad. This was the important thing, the thing that cut deep into him, leaving him with a feeling of bleakness and age, turning everything that had gone before into ashes in his mouth.

He sat long in hurt silence, his mind too stunned to function. Then like a man walking in a nightmare, he put on his shirt and his hat. He found his old pistol and oiled it carefully and replaced the old shells with new ones from his holster. When he was satisfied with this he went out and saddled his horse and set out toward Juniper.

Riding thus through the black night with no sound about him but the thud of his horse's flat-footed walk, he was sunk into a deeper blackness of self-incrimination. He had tried to handle the kid right, but somewhere along the line he had failed. So Bud was dead at twenty.

If he hadn't quarreled with Bud earlier in the evening, this thing might not have happened. It didn't matter now that he had merely tried to show the kid that this bunch of roughnecks who had come to town would get him into trouble. He had been a town marshal in too many such boomtowns not to know these things. He had quit his law job just to get Bud out of such places. Only last week he had sold his saloon when he saw what was coming to Juniper, this, too, to keep the kid out of trouble.

But it hadn't done any good. He'd brought Bud out to the ranch he'd bought against just such a time, and they'd bought some cattle and hired Billy Strode, the only man who was willing to come out and work at riding wages during boom times, and they were going



to settle down to ranching.

But Bud had to have his fling. Ragtown was exciting, the riproaring drinking and gambling and fighting thrilled him, and he couldn't let it alone. He'd been drunk every night for a month, almost, and Mary had got impatient with him. Now he wouldn't get drunk any more because he was dead, and he was only twenty years old.

Maybe if Jim hadn't bawled him out, maybe if Bud hadn't got hot-headed when Mary tried to reason with him. Maybe—But he was dead. He had stuck his neck too many times into the deadfalls, and they had shot him down.

Jim cursed the ragtown toughs; and he cursed a girl that walked out on a man the minute he started getting into trouble.

He reached the funeral parlor connected with Winslow's Mercantile at about eight o'clock, and Old Man Winslow took him to see Bud's body.

"I'd like to see you a minute when you're through, Jim," Winslow said, and then went out and left him alone with the coffin.

Hardeman stood long and silent beside the body of his kid brother, and he was filled with bitterness and self-condemnation. Perhaps he shouldn't have tried to raise the kid himself during these last five years—he could have sent him to an uncle and aunt at the time their mother had died, and maybe that would have been better than a bachelor trying to do the job. He didn't know; he'd only tried to do the right thing because he thought so much of Bud, but he must have made a mess of it. He blamed himself, but he could not find out where he had made his mistake.

He had to get out—it was a pain too great for him to stand here and look at Bud and to know that he was responsible for his death—partially responsible at least. In a mood of self-accusation he was prone to feel that everyone was to blame but Bud himself. There was Mary Winslow. . . .

He walked through the door that led to the general store and met Mary face to face. The girl laid a hand on his arm and he looked at her as though he were not seeing her.

"I'm sorry about this, Jim," she said. "But what can anybody say at a time like this? I know how much you and Bud thought of each other."

"No," he said flatly, staring over her head. "There's nothing to say."

His tone disturbed her. She looked at him earnestly as though trying to pierce the mask he had laid over his face. "Jim, did Buddy tell you that he asked me to marry him? He's asked me several times in the last few weeks."

"What did you tell him?"

THE girl's eyes widened a little. "Why, he—he was just a boy. I'm almost your age. I liked Buddy but I didn't love him. I never gave him the slightest reason to think I did."

"No?" It was torn out of him in spite of himself. "I rather thought you did."

He started to pass her, but her hand on his sleeve tightened with sudden force.

"Jim? I think you'd better explain that."

She was angry and the thought made his heart lurch for she still had all the old power to hurt or to exalt him. But he set his lips stubbornly.

"I saw something one day," he said. "I saw you kiss him. And if a girl kissed me like that I expect I'd have some reason to think she belonged to me."

"Oh, Jim." She looked stricken. "You saw me kiss him. I did kiss Buddy once or twice. I felt about him as though he were a younger brother. I even told him that."

"He didn't feel about you like a brother," Hardeman said.

"But—"

"It was because of that he started to drink the way he did," Jim said harshly. "Drink and try to buck Silver Storr's crooked game."

She flinched visibly. "You—you're blaming me for sending Bud to his death?" she faltered.

He shook his head angrily. "I'm blaming you no more than myself."

"But you think we're both to blame?"

"Bud was just a kid," he said stubbornly. "Ask yourself the question: did you walk out on him just when he needed you?"

She drew a catchy breath. "Jim, believe me. There was nothing but a

friendly affection between Bud and me. In spite of what you think you saw. I'm sorry. I know how you're suffering. Will you let me pass now, please?"

He moved stiffly aside and she brushed past, unable to avoid touching him as she went through the narrow doorway. He tingled at the soft touch of her against his body and his nostrils held her faint perfume as she went. Then he drew a breath, lifted his sagging shoulders and marched on through the store back to her father's office.

Old Winslow was seated at his desk, waiting for Hardeman.

"You've made quite a name for yourself as a town-tamer before you came here and went into the saloon business," Winslow said after Hardeman was seated. "I wonder if you could recommend a good man for Juniper? Things are getting impossible around here and Basil couldn't begin to handle them if he wanted to, which I'm beginning to doubt."

"Yes," Hardeman answered. "I'll take the job, myself. As soon as I take care of a personal matter."

CHAPTER II

Dangerous Men

HARDEMAN went out onto the street and walked down to the Palace Cafe, where he sat with his back to the wall and drank four cups of coffee, which cleared his head a little. He could not eat, but some of the numbness was wearing off, and he was beginning to see things more in their relative importance.

The news of Bud's death had driven the thought of the robbery to the back of his mind; now he gave it some consideration. He had bought the ranch with the earnings from his saloon, foreseeing the day when the railroad would push on farther south into Texas, and Juniper would no longer be the roistering, wild railhead it now was, but a quiet ranching and farming settlement. As the tracks were laid, the ragtown riffraff and labor would follow it, the trail herds would not come, and Juniper would go to sleep.

MARY WINSLOW

Hardeman had prepared against that day, and had sold his saloon at a profit in the height of the boom. But Billy Strode had stolen all his cash, and the ranch would not be paying off for a while. In the meantime he was out of money and had to make a living. The chances of finding Billy Strode in time to get his money back were remote, at least.

This was a serious situation, but it would have to wait until he had taken care of this other business. And then maybe the ranch business wouldn't matter. Silver Storr had killed at least a dozen men, and not all of these had been drunk. And Storr was working for "Kansas City" Durbin, along with Rainey May and Schultz, both top gunhands in their own right. Hardeman might not need his money.

He left a half dollar on the table and went out and walked down toward the barber shop. The barber was sweeping the sidewalk, while Rainey May leaned against the wall waiting for a shave. They all went inside and May got into the chair.

While the barber was nearly finished shaving him, May spoke to Hardeman.

"Too bad about your brother," he said.

"Storr's a kind of touchy hombre about how people talk to him."

"Tell Storr for me," Hardeman said quietly, "that I am looking for him. I'm going to find out how touchy he is."

May shrugged as he got out of the chair and looked at his powdered face in the mirror. He paid the barber—placed his fawn-colored hat carefully on his head, smiled wisely at Hardeman getting into the chair, and went out.

"Give me the works," Hardeman said as the barber threw an apron over him, covering his body, hands and gun.

The barber pinned the cloth at his neck. "Storr and May and Schultz are as close as three peas in a pod," he said uneasily.

"Yeah! Use the clippers on my neck and shave down the sides."

The barber shut his mouth and worked with frequent uneasy glances out the window. In a few minutes men walked by with labored efforts at appearing casual, but managed to look in through the barber shop window. The word was getting around—a tension was building up out on the street that matched that of the barber.

Rainey May was in the K. C. Bar talking to Durbin, Schultz and Storr. "What we'd better do is for one of us to stand across the street, another in the middle, and the other one on the near sidewalk. I know this Hardeman from away back, and he ain't no clay pigeon."

K. C. Durbin was a big man with a dominating personality, and he expressed contempt for May's idea. "Are you trying to tell me you birds have to gang up on one rancher? I thought I hired men that could stand on their own legs."

"You don't know Hardeman," Storr said. "He used to be a marshal."

"Do marshals grow bullet-proof hides now? Or are you just plain afraid of him?"

Storr bridled. "I ain't afraid of no man that walks. It's just that what's the use in taking chances when there's three of us?"

"Just this—the trouble is between you and Hardeman. Kill him, and it's just a grudge fight. The three of you gun him down and it's murder, and the whole town gets up in arms. There's a crowd around here already beefing about the way things is going."

"Let 'em beef!"

"You can go only so far. You've got to make things look reasonable. No, Storr. I been paying you good money. Now go out and earn it. This hombre is just another sorehead." Durbin turned to May. "Rainey, you go find Basil Denton and tell him I want to see him right away."

RAINEY reached the batwing doors, then turned. "There comes your friend out of the barber shop," he said.

Then he went on out and headed down the street, in the direction away from the approaching Hardeman.

Hardeman came down the street from the barber shop, noting that his passage caused people to suddenly find business behind their walls. He saw faces peering at him from behind windows, and smiled a tight smile. They were used to this kind of thing.

This was an old familiar business to him, too, for he had cleaned up towns as bad as this, towns that had mushroomed, run wild for a day and died, even as Juniper would soon die. Unhappy towns, unhappy times, but they would still come and go, living their days of tragedy, dying their deaths of neglect.

He kept a sharp eye out for Silver Storr, watching corners and roofs for men Durbin might have planted to cover the gunman. Durbin was the brain from which much of this evil flowed. Durbin had been Hardeman's competitor, had run his saloon wide open, high, wide and handsome, while Hardeman had catered to the more decent element, had run honest games, and had never been known to roll a drunk. Durbin had felt such competition.

He saw Schultz, a heavy, coarse gunny running to beef and bone, loitering outside the K. C., near an open window, and it was evident that the Dutchman was reporting his progress to those inside. He walked out into the middle of the dusty street and continued until he had a vacant lot back of him, and the K. C. Saloon in front of him.

Then he spoke to Schultz. "Tell your friend I'm waiting for him," he said, and stopped.

He stood there perhaps three minutes before Silver Storr came out through the batwings and stepped aside on the board sidewalk so that the wall of the building was toward his back.

Silver Storr went in for fancy pants, and his clothes were of a light color to match his prematurely graying light hair and pale face. One front tooth shone gold back of his short lips. He carried a toothpick in his mouth, and moved with a deceptively casual easiness.

He moved the toothpick to the side of his mouth with his tongue and called to Hardeman.

"You looking for me?"

He seemed almost disinterested, in his casual pose, but beneath it all were tensed muscles. His white hands hung easily at his sides, but the hands were not far from his gun-butts.

"That's right, Storr. We'll clean up that little business my brother didn't finish last night."

There was a forced grin on the blond man's face. "You sure you feel up to it? Your brother made a mistake. Maybe you'll be making the same one."

"Then they'll bury me with him," Hardeman said. "Me—or you, Storr! I'm blowing that brass fang down your throat! Defend yourself!"

Hardeman's voice had suddenly taken on the cutting edge of a buzz saw, and its effect wiped the grin off Storr's face, and replaced it with a look that for once gave men a glimpse of what was inside of him. It was as though he had unexpectedly come face to face with Death, and the sight had panicked him. It was not a pretty look on his face as his hands reached in frenzied speed for his two guns.

Hardeman's draw was not a flashy thing, but it was as smooth as oil. His hand went down and came up with his gun in one smooth arc that was deceptive in its speed. And at the end of the arc the gun spoke in unison with Storr's two weapons.

One of Storr's bullets whistled by Hardeman's head, the other nicked a rib, but Hardeman remained standing. Storr's body slapped back against the porch railing of the saloon, then crumpled to the board sidewalk. Storr threshed on the walk a moment before he died.

Hardeman's bullet had hit him in the mouth driving his gold tooth before it as it tore through his head and came out through the base of his skull.

There was a heavy silence up and down the single street of Juniper, and then heads began showing out of windows and doorways, and there were people coming down to the scene of the shooting.

BIG K. C. Durbin came out the batwings, and Schultz joined him as the pair stood over the body of Silver Storr. The Dutchman was awe-struck.

"Shot him right where he said he would." He shook his head in wonderment.

Hardeman stood in the middle of the street, his gun holstered, and his thumbs in his belt. "Any of you friends of his got any comment to make about it?"

Durbin gave Hardeman a careful going over with his gaze, then deliberately turned his back on him and spoke to the Dutchman.

"Get Winslow to take care of him," he said, and walked back into the saloon.

Hardeman waited a while, not knowing whether Durbin had a move in mind or not. And then Basil Denton, the short, fat marshal came out from around back of somewhere and approached Hardeman, his star shining on his open vest, his gun high around his big middle, and sweat pouring down his greasy face. The marshal was uncomfortable.

"I'll have to arrest you, Hardeman," he said in his squeaky voice. "This public shooting is getting too much, and we're cracking down on it. Just hand me your gun."

Hardeman looked at the squirming man, and Denton's eyes wavered. Then Hardeman laughed a cold, mirthless laugh. Denton's jowls and neck turned red and he wiped his face with a big blue handkerchief. And then Hardeman laughed at him again, and there was no humor in that laughter.

"Go tell Durbin he'll have to send a better specimen than you to take my gun," he said contemptuously. "Maybe he'd like to do it himself."

Then Hardeman turned his back

squarely on the marshal and walked down to the Fair Shake Bar, the place he'd sold.

The Fair Shake was cool, shady and clean, and Hardeman found old Mike Murphy and his son Colin busy at the bar with hacksaws, sawing the barrels off two new double-barrel shotguns. Old Murphy was a massive, red-faced, smiling Irishman who was well filled out around the middle, but who was all muscle. His son was a duplicate of him without the middle-age bulge. They were a clean-cut pair, and they greeted Hardeman with pleasure when he ordered a bottle set out.

"Going to war?" Hardeman asked as he filled their glasses.

"You warned me that the town was getting out of hand," the elder Murphy answered, "And I ain't holding it against you. But it sure hit quick! A gang of roughnecks from ragtown came up last night and tried to take over. I think it was a put-up job, because the marshal dropped me a hint this morning that the town has to be wide open. I think our friend Durbin was feeling me out, but me and the boy ain't bein' pushed around very easy. We ain't even fixing to let 'em make a mad house out of this place."

"Durbin knows this boom won't last, and he wants to get control of everything and cash in on it quick," Hardeman said. "An honest place is hard competition for him. Like I told you, he's hungry for a dollar and he don't care how he gets it. Just keep your eyes on him."

"Too bad about the kid," the old man sympathized. "That kind of thing ain't going to happen in this place, no matter how wild the city dads want this town to be."

"Thanks. It's not everybody wants it that way, just a little clique that wants to cash in quick. There are some good people in this town who want to see it a decent place to live. And trouble is coming of it."

Hardeman had been pouring down one drink after another as he talked, trying to get the chill and tightness out of his insides, but it wouldn't work. The whisky wouldn't take hold.

Murphy had been eyeing this for a while unobtrusively, and now he offered a suggestion. "Want the boy to fix you up a steak? I know how you feel, but you'd better put some food down along with that liquor."

"No, thanks," Hardeman said, and drained another one. "Here's one thing you can do for me, though. Remember that hand I hired to work out on the ranch? He laid a gunbarrel over my head and stole my money belt. It may be that he won't figure on me hanging out in town much, and he may pop in one of these nights to spend some of the money. He's probably holing up out in ragtown. Corner him for me if he comes in, will you?"

HARDEMAN paid for his drinks and went out, going down to Winslow's store. He found a group in Winslow's office in a hot argument. Among those crowded in the room were Durbin, Josh Harmon, who ran the hotel, Haycroft the blacksmith, Oller from the feed store, and J. D. van Alston, the engineer in charge of the railroad construction.

And sitting in the corner, sweat on his round face, was Denton, the town marshal.

There was agitation in the room, and Hardeman had the feeling that he had walked into a hot battle. Winslow was sitting back in his swivel chair at his desk, and his face was red. He turned to Hardeman.

"We've been discussing the situation here," he said. "And there's some disagreement. However, I'm still the mayor here, and three or the four councilmen are with me. We're letting Denton go, and you will be the town marshal if you are still willing."

Durbin looked coldly at Hardeman, then back to Winslow, and spoke up hotly. "This is a cowtown, not an old ladies' home. We depend on trail drivers and out-of-town people, like the railroad labor, for our business. You can't treat them people like they was children and expect to do business with them. If they want to play rough that's their affair."

Josh Harmon, who ran the hotel, agreed. "We've got a good marshal. What do we need with another one? Denton can keep order if things get out of hand."

"He can't!" Winslow snapped. "We've

got a midnight closing law here. Has he ever enforced it? There have been half a dozen or more fights every night on the streets and in Durbin's place, and there have been at least two killings a week, and never an arrest. You call that keeping order?"

Van Alston, the engineer, spoke up. "I tell you, the laborers are getting pretty hot under the collar about the way they've been robbed and cheated and slugged. If something is not done to give them half a chance for their money, I can't be responsible for what will happen. And if a hundred or so of those Irishmen take a notion to march in here some night and take this town apart there won't be any way to stop them."

Haycroft, the blacksmith, said, "It shouldn't come to that. If Hardeman is as good a man as we hear he is, and if he'll take the job, we could get this town cleaned up."

Durbin said angrily, "You're just hiring a killer to put a bullet into anybody that happens to be having a little too much fun. You're just trying to drive what little business we've got away from here. This town don't need a paid killer."

Hardeman's eyes were cold. "Here's one job the town won't have to pay for," he said, and drove his fist into Durbin's face. "And be careful what you call me."

Durbin fell over backward, knocking a letter file over as he fell. He got to his feet slowly, and wiped his bleeding mouth with a white silk handkerchief. He looked at the blood smear on the handkerchief for a long moment in silence. Then he walked over to the door, tense with rage.

He turned and said, "Gentlemen, this ain't a one-man town yet. We've all got something to say about how it's run, and I'll speak my piece where it will do some good. Come on, Denton."

The marshal started to follow him.

"Just a minute, Denton," Winslow said. "You can leave your badge here."

The fat man glared at Winslow a moment, then unpinned the star and dropped it on the floor. "That don't mean nothing to me," he growled. "I wouldn't wear it on a bet in a buttermilk town like this."

Then he turned and followed Durbin out."

CHAPTER III

New Lawman

THERE was silence until the pair had left, and then Winslow said, "Well, Hardeman, it's an open break. A showdown. It's up to you. Anything you want?"

"You said there was a midnight closing law. Have you got a law covering crooked gambling? One on vagrancy?"

"We've got 'em on the books, but so far they've never been enforced. You can close a crooked gambling establishment, and you can arrest a gambler or a gunman, or anybody without any known legitimate means of support as a vagrant."

"That's all I need," Hardeman said,

[*Turn page*]

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picking up the badge. "What time have you arranged for Bud's funeral?"

"Six o'clock."

"Put it off until tomorrow, will you?"

He walked out onto the street wearing his star—and wearing an uncertainty about his life which he had not felt in five years, not since he had laid aside his gun and badge and vowed never to wear them again.

But now again he walked upon a street in the knowledge that he was living from hour to hour, that every mouth of every alley might hold a man who could snuff that life out with one quick contraction of his trigger finger. His friends would not hurt him, but neither could they shield him, and by acceptance of the star he had contracted to make enemies of every gunhand who chose not to like him.

This was the price he would pay for making this a town where things like that which had happened to Bud would not happen to other people. This much, at least, he owed to the boy in the coffin. And to other boys who would come along later.

It was getting on past noon now, and night men from the construction job were in town drinking and milling around. The afternoon was their time off. Hardeman walked through them without concern, for even the drinkers did not make much trouble in the daytime. He stopped off at two of the smaller saloons where the laborers hung out.

"Midnight closing," he told both proprietors. "And if any of your dealers have been drawing pictures on the backs of their cards, you'd better throw them out and get clean decks."

"Town drying up?" Merle Johnson asked.

"Not if you take it easy. But you boys are going to have to straighten out some of the kinks if you want to stay open."

"I've seen these reforms come and go. How long's this one gonna last?"

"As long as I'm marshal."

He passed out of the last place and stopped in his tracks a moment. Mary Winslow had just come out of Ella Marple's dressmaking place with packages under her arms. One of the railroad laborers had been reeling down the street, and when he came abreast of her he stopped. He said something to her which Hardeman could not hear, and she answered him. She seemed to draw back from him as she spoke.

Hardeman had started toward them when he saw the man reach out and pat the girl on the head with his big hand and say something else. Hardeman quickened his steps.

He reached the man as Mary backed away from him. He caught the man by the collar of his shirt and swung him around until he slammed him up against the wall of the building. The man bounced out with fists flying, and a solid blow caught Hardeman in the pit of the stomach, another in the face.

Hardeman threw his weight against the man, sinking his shoulders into the massive chest, and drove the man against the wall again. The man's fist came up and caught Hardeman under the chin. Hardeman got both hands in the sides of the man's collar and with a series of thrusts bounced the man's head against the wall repeatedly until the man's eyes went blank. Then Hardeman backed away from him.

"He won't bother you any more," he promised Mary.

THE girl stood frozen either in shock or fright, and she had her hand up to her face. She spoke as though she were in a daze. "He touched me. He put his hand on me—"

"Did he threaten you?"

"No. He was babbling something about having a little girl that looked like me back somewhere—"

Half a dozen men had come rushing up at sight of the trouble, and now as the crowd grew, there was an undertone of muttering among them. Hardeman studied them, judged the character of their anger, and then spoke to them.

"Beat it!" he snapped. "It's all over."

He held them with his eyes until they obeyed, then he turned back to the girl.

"Mary, if I thought he meant you any harm I'd tear him apart with my own hands. He's drunk, and he probably thought he was seeing things. Those men are dirty, and they are drunks, but they are humans. They must have had homes before they started following the

railroad—must have had families that they sometimes think about. The sight of you must have dug up something that was deep down inside this man. You see what I mean? Those men are human, too."

The girl looked at Hardeman as though he were a stranger, her eyes were wide as though she were startled, and then she was looking at the ground beneath her feet.

"I see what you mean," she said in a subdued voice.

Hardeman turned to the man who stood weaving against the wall. "You beat it out to your camp and stay there till you sober up," he ordered. "Go on!"

The man pushed himself away from the wall. "I'm going," he muttered. "I'll go get my bunch, and we'll see how much you thieving people can push us around."

"Beat it!"

The man went reeling down the street. Hardeman turned back to the girl.

"Can I walk you home, Mary?" he asked. "I've got something to say to you."

They walked almost in silence, Hardeman conscious of the eyes that followed them and the whispers which sprang out behind them as they passed. The girl seemd unaware, walking with her eyes fixed on something beyond. At her gate she stopped and waited for him to begin.

"It's like this," Hardeman said awkwardly. "I guess I was hit pretty hard when I heard about Bud getting killed. I couldn't think straight and I blamed you and myself and everyone but Bud for his trouble. I've been thinking about it and I was wrong. I don't know the whole answer yet, but I reckon that what happens to a man is a whole lot his own fault. He's always got a choice of doing or not doing a thing. It's not always an easy choice, but then, nothing is easy. Anyhow, I was wrong in blaming you and I'm sorry."

A little smile began at the corners of her lips and eyes and spread to light up her whole face. She was amazingly beautiful when she smiled. Her hand touched his and the contact was fire under velvet.

"Thank you, Jim," she whispered. Then she raised herself quickly on tiptoes and for a blinding moment her lips, smooth and warm, pressed themselves to his.

Jim Hardeman went back down the street and he felt a little drunk.

HE WENT into the Fair Shake and had a drink. "About that steak, Mike," he said. "Can I still take you up on it?"

"Sure, Jim," old Mike Murphy said.

He put a single thick, well-marbled rib of baby beef on the kerosene grill. He brought knives and forks to one of the tables where Hardeman could sit facing the door and then sat down beside him.

"Word gets around fast, don't it?" he smiled. "Durbin came in and told me about you getting that star. He's getting worried. Wanted me to throw in with him in bucking that midnight closing. I told him midnight was late enough for me to stay up, and he left me with the tip that I'd better spend some thought on which side my bread was buttered on. You think he's got the strength to back up his play?"

"I hope not," Hardeman admitted, "But I've got an idea it won't be long before we'll know. That track is going down pretty fast, and the stream of easy money is going to dry up one of these days."

"Me and the boy has got them two short shotguns, if you need us," Murphy promised. He went and turned the broiling steak, then when he came back he tossed a twenty-dollar gold piece on the table in front of Hardeman. "I like to have forgot that," he said. "Ever see it before?"

Hardeman picked up the coin and examined a tiny hole near the rim, a hole worn around the edges. He spun the coin on the table and looked at the grizzled-haired old man. "Wasn't that among the gold coins you gave me when you bought me out?"

"It was for a fact," Murphy said. "I got it from a broke gambler that wore it for a watch charm. And if you don't remember spending it—"

"I didn't spend any of the twenty-dollar gold coins. That one was in my money belt. Where'd you get it?"

"It came in just a little while ago.

A Mexican brought it in and bought a dozen decks of playing cards, four quarts of whiskey, and a big bag of sandwiches. That means somebody is settling down to a long poker game somewhere."

"You know where this Mexican came from?"

"Down in ragtown, I reckon. Anyhow I recognized that coin, and I sent Colin to trail him so's to see which tent he went into. He ought to be back pretty soon. Make anything out of that?"

"I make out that Billy Strode hit for ragtown after stealing my money. Probably holing up with some friends. Thanks a lot, Murphy."

Murphy pulled out his pocketbook. "Show you a picture of my granddaughter. Prettiest kid you ever seen."

He brought out a picture of a black haired girl of about ten, wearing pigtails and a grin. "Colin's going to bring her and her mother here just as soon as things quieten down a bit. Ain't that a pretty little girl for you?"

"Swell kid," Hardeman agreed.

And while Murphy brought the steak, Hardeman was struck by a question that left him wondering. What was the difference between the instincts of a decent man like Murphy thinking of his pretty granddaughter, and that drunken gandy dancer whose sight of Mary dredged up some long-neglected pride in his own daughter? What was good and what was evil? They both wore a thousand masks, and those masks sometimes concealed, sometimes suddenly revealed what? Lonely men.

Colin Murphy came in as Hardeman finished his steak, and he had spotted the ragtown tent where the poker game was going on.

After Colin had told him about finding the place, old Mike Murphy nodded. "You go down with Jim and show him which one it is," he said. "Might as well take your gun and give him a hand if he needs it."

Hardeman liked the spirit of this pair of newcomers. "You just show me the place," he said. "This is personal, not town business."

THEY went out and walked down the new-laid tracks a mile to the trestle over the creek. Here there was a siding with boxcars converted into living quarters for some of the men. Others lived in tents pitched without design along the creek bank and covering five or six acres. The tents were of dirty gray canvas, some of them sided and floored with boards, some not. There were wagons with canvas tops through which stovepipes protruded.

There was disorder, there was the stink of garbage and of evil, and there were dogs and working men and a small scattering of bedraggled women and children, and above all there was the atmosphere of a tight-knit little group of fighting, snarling, people with their backs up against the outside world.

"A hellhole if I ever saw one," Colin Murphy observed. "How people can live like that!"

"They're humans," Hardeman said, "and they just can't do any better, or they would, I imagine."

"There's the tent that gold piece came from," Murphy said. "You want me to cover the back while you take the front?"

"You can go around to see that my man doesn't escape," Hardeman answered. "But don't get into any fracas that starts—that's my business."

They were standing before a typical A-shaped tent of dingy canvas, with the front flaps closed, and they could hear the rumble of voices from inside. Hardeman nodded, and Murphy walked around to the rear. Then Hardeman opened the front flap, stepped inside, and dropped the flap down back of him.

A small wooden table was surrounded by boxes on the dirt floor on which sat Billy Strode, Rainey May and two other men stripped down to their undershirts. The rest of the space was occupied by two cots and a small two-eyed stove.

Whiskey, playing cards, tin cups—and gold and silver money were on the table.

The cards Billy Strode was shuffling dropped from his hands and some of them fell on the dirt floor. Strode, always unshaven, stared in blank-eyed, half-drunken stupor at the sight of Hardeman. Rainey May's mouth went tight and he slid his box carefully back from the table, so that there would be no interference with his gun hand. The lantern on the table sent a small wisp of

black smoke up from one corner of the wick. The silence was complete.

"You made a mistake, Billy," Hardeman said softly. "You should have kept going."

CHAPTER IV
Tent Town Fire

STRODE looked back at Hardeman and saw an expression in the lawman's eyes that sent chills through him. He stumbled back off his box, and was backing away.

"No! Jim, don't! I was drunk and didn't know what I was doin'. Take your money back, but don't kill me. I was drunk, I tell you. I didn't know what I was doin'."

"You knew enough to take the money. Now lay it on the table." Hardeman's voice was very low. "Every cent of it!"

With his eyes never leaving Hardeman's, like a bird charmed by a snake, Billy Strode's hands opened his shirt and he unbuckled the money belt and laid it on the table.

"I spent a little, and Rainey won some of it," he said. "There's all I got left."

The queer light in Hardeman's eyes focused on Rainey May. "Shell it out, Rainey. Put it on the table."

Rainey May had a quirk at the corner of his mouth, the perpetual grin he wore. He picked his teeth with his tongue. "I ain't got nothing o' yours, Hardeman. Anything I won come from this man, not from you."

"It's mine. Lay it on the table!"

May kept the grin on his face and did not move while he weighed the situation, calculating his chances against Hardeman. He was talking to give himself time.

"If you took my money it would be just a holdup," he said.

"If you don't like it, you can have me arrested. Lay the money on the table. This is the last time I'm telling you."

"And suppose I don't?"

"Then I'll take it off your dead body."

May had evidently come to the conclusion that the odds weren't to his liking. He took a handful of gold out of his vest pocket and dumped it on the table.

"I'm just letting you keep this for me," he said. "I'll be wanting it back."

"Back away from the table, all of you," Hardeman said.

They obeyed the cold words backed by the threat they saw in Hardeman's eyes, and Hardeman scooped up his money, putting the gold into his pocket. He had to fold the money belt to put it away, and with both his hands engaged, May went for his gun.

Hardeman saw the man's hands move, and he ducked. He dropped his money belt and jerked out his gun just as Billy Strode kicked over the table. The lantern rolled over to the wall and the place was plunged into gloom.

Rainey May's gun blast shattered the air in the tent and Hardeman answered his fire. May shrieked and went over backward, overturning the monkey stove. Strode and the other pair crouched in corners. May lay groaning and kicking in the dirt, among the fallen stovepipes.

Hardeman picked up his money belt, folded it with one hand and jammed it into his hip pocket. "I could take you in for this, Billy," he said, covering Strode, "but it's a personal matter, and I'm not using my star to settle personal grudges. Get out of town and don't come back. You other men, take care of that gambler. I only shot him in the leg."

Strode's eyes met his sullenly a moment, and then turned to the corner of the tent. Then he yelled.

"Fire!"

Hardeman did not turn instantly, suspecting a trick. He backed away so that he could see the whole interior, and at that moment he heard the crackling of the blaze. The oil lamp had broken, and the burning wick had ignited the kerosene-splashed wall of the tent. Flames licked up hungrily at the rotten canvas.

Outside, Murphy had seen the blaze eat through, and an old woman hovering over a washtub had seen it and shouted. Women and children took up the cry and came rushing forward, a sprinkling of men with them.

Hardeman shouted at Strode, "Help me get May out of here," and the two

of them dragged the wounded man out and up the line of tents to safety.

Hardeman came back, and he and Murphy helped fight the fire. The flames spread rapidly, between the crowded tents, and four of them were burned before the fifth was jerked down and dragged away to break the course of the blaze.

IN THE meantime the crowd of stringy-haired, shabby women were talking and grumbling among themselves, and eyeing Hardeman and Murphy with hard looks. The men, as they finished fighting the blaze, gathered in another knot, and they, too, were talking it over, throwing angry glances at Hardeman and Murphy.

"That's trouble making," Murphy said. "They don't like town people, and they're blaming us for this."

"It's bad," Hardeman admitted. "They're sore enough at the town now, and this makes it worse. Trouble could bust wide open when the men come off work tonight."

They started up the tent-lined street of ragtown, and came to where the men and women blocked their passage. Hardeman saw the sullen anger in the sea of faces as he pushed through them. Women made comments to him, hinting, accusing him of trying to burn them out.

The men were silent, letting their women throw the insults, but behind their tight faces there was the flame of mob anger growing, an anger born of a hundred abuses the ragtown laborers had suffered at the hands of Durbin's gamblers and the more sinister of the men who hung out at Durbin's and preyed on the drunken workers.

Hardeman and Murphy pushed through the last of them and headed back for town.

"If I ever saw a mob spirit being born, I saw it in them faces," Murphy said as they passed the last tent.

Hardeman had seen the same thing, and he knew it was the beginning of trouble. "We've got to be ready for them," he admitted. "This has been brewing for a long time, and it ain't going to be a pretty thing."

"We'll be around with those shotguns if you need us," the young Murphy promised . . . .

It was that period at dusk when in small towns most of the business houses have closed for the day, and the night lights have not yet been lighted. The evening breeze had not come up, and the between-times stillness of the street was reflected in the still coolness of the air, a definite quiet pause between day and night. Usually one of peace.

Winslow and a group of the other business men had dropped into Murphy's for their evening drink before going home, but there was not the usual cheerfulness that usually accompanied these few social moments. When Hardeman came in there was a general stirring, and eyes went to him.

There was a nervousness about the little group of businessmen which reflected the tense quietude of the street. It was like the motionless heat which gripped the land before a violent tornado during that period when the wind from one direction stops and the head-on wind from the opposite direction has not yet hit. Ominous. Threatening.

Hardeman and Murphy told them about the trouble in ragtown. "You gentlemen had better be prepared to defend your property," he ended. "I'm going to do all I can, but if I read the signs right, there'll be enough trouble for everybody when the men come off work tonight."

"Who are they sore at?" Winslow asked. "Durbin, or all of us? It's Durbin who's been imposing on them."

"A mob doesn't draw very fine lines. If they get a raw deal in a town, they're sore at the whole town."

Winslow thought this over. "Durbin is the cause of the trouble, but will he be with us when it hits?"

"I doubt it," Hardeman admitted. "It's a three cornered fight. If Durbin thinks he can profit by the mob tearing down the town, then he'll side 'em. If he thinks his own little army can't protect him, he'll yell to us for help."

"You going to let him stay open?"

"I can't make him close until midnight. But if he's still in business then, he'll close."

"I dread to see a thing like this," Winslow said wearily. "It means blood-

shed. But it's been brewing a long time. Well, we'll be around to do what we can, Hardeman. If you need us, set up a yell."

JIM HARDEMAN walked out and crossed the almost deserted street. The doors of Durbin's were opened outward, and he stepped into the place and stood still while his eyes swept the room.

There were a dozen or more men lined up at the bar, men who had no jobs, but hustled their living from the laborers. Four sat around a table, another played a slot machine idly. The gunman Schultz stood at the bar with another barrel-chested man. Durbin was down at the end of the bar having a drink out of his private bottle.

Hardeman approached Durbin who stood observing the ash on his cigar and waiting for him.

Durbin said, "Have a drink, Marshal," and he underscored the title with his voice.

"Thanks, no. I just dropped in to tell you that starting right away, there'll be no more marked cards nor rigged slot machines used in town. And all saloons will close at midnight."

Durbin flicked the long white ash from his cigar thoughtfully, and then asked disinterestedly, "Is that a fact?"

"It is a fact."

Schultz was a lumbering kind of a man with black hair showing at the throat of his open shirt, and a reddish skin that had a black undertone from the heavy growth of beard, even when he was freshly shaved. He had glass blue eyes that were now turned on Hardeman. He stood sideways to the bar, his gun hand swinging free.

"We might want to stick around after twelve," he said.

The men at the bar were listening, and the room became silent. Hardeman gave Schultz his attention. Those men back of the gunny might want to back him up if the showdown came right now. These parasites picked their living from Durbin's customers, and hence were his first line of defense.

"Are you running this place?" Hardeman asked Schultz.

"I might take an interest in things," Schultz grinned. "I might want a drink after midnight."

The men along the bar laughed. This showdown had been nosed around—things like that travel with the speed of light—and these men were ready to take a hand in anything that threatened their living. One break the right way would start them; they could bear down on Hardeman and by force of numbers grab him up and throw him out into the dust of the street. And that would be the end of him, for the town would laugh him out of his job. It would hurt him worse than a gunbattle.

Durbin knew this as well as Hardeman did, and he stood and waited. It would be a simple and easy way of settling the whole matter. First, the crowd could handle Hardeman, or second, Schultz could take care of him, backed by the crowd. Either way, it would be a victory for Durbin.

Hardeman turned his back on Durbin and walked toward Schultz. Schultz stepped away from the bar and squared both feet on the floor. Men back of Schultz got aside quickly.

One man standing between Schultz and the oncoming Hardeman backed himself away from the bar with his two hands, pushing himself into Hardeman's path without looking at him except through the backbar mirror.

Hardeman caught the man by the back of the collar and by the belt and threw him clear across the room, where he landed on the floor.

"Never get in my way again," he snapped.

Nobody watched the man pick himself up, nobody cared. The room held its breath.

HARDEMAN turned back to Schultz, and their eyes were locked again in a silent struggle for mastery. He saw Schultz's eyes widen, grow thoughtful, speculative. Schultz's lips tightened, the wind whistled through the big nostrils of his flat nose. The veins swelled in Schultz's temples—then Schultz's eyes darted quickly around the room—and Schultz's wind went out of him. He could not stand face to face with a fearless man, and his courage broke.

Hardeman reached out and took the

man's gun out of its scabbard. "I'm taking you down and throwing you in for vagrancy," he said. "Move out of here."

He took the nerve-broken gunman out through the door, and then the tight silence in the saloon burst like an over-inflated balloon.

Hardeman threw the man into the cell and came back out onto the walk and lit a fresh cigar, then walked back up the street in the falling dusk.

Hardeman stopped at the mouth of a dark alley and said, "Howdy, Basil."

The deposed marshal's fat form emerged from the alleyway. "You got eyes like a cat, Jim," he said nervously.

"I'm no stranger to dark alleys," Hardeman answered.

"There might be guns in these alleys before the sun rises." Denton said. "You've stuck your nose in a wolf trap this time, mister."

"Then you'd better check your gun somewhere, Basil. Those things sometimes backfire on a man."

"I know which end of a gun is safe."

"Do you?" Hardeman asked. "There's a lot that don't."

WORKING men were dribbling in from ragtown in twos and threes, standing on the ominously quiet street talking in low voices among themselves, eyes fastened on the few townspeople abroad, drifting into and out of saloons, waiting like buzzards smelling approaching death.

The town was slowly filling with the advance guard of trouble, men filled with sullen anger boiling to the point where it would overflow at the first flareup. Eagerly waiting for it.

Hardeman looked them over, read the things in their minds—and went into the Silver Spoon for pie and coffee.

Sarah Laurance ran the place, a buxom widow who was a friend to everybody, and who had a habit of saying what was on her mind. She gave him his pie and coffee, and she was silent for a while. Then she spoke. "Shame about Bud, Jim," she said.

"Shame about a lot of kids raised in a boom town," Jim said. "I should have got him away sooner."

Sarah kept herself busy polishing glasses for a while, and Jim saw that she was bursting to say something. She couldn't hold it back.

" 'Tain't altogether that. You're more to blame than just keeping him here."

"What do you mean, Sarah?"

"Well, here goes my big mouth again, but why didn't you go on and marry that gal yourself? Then it wouldn't have happened."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't tell me you're that dumb, Jim. Mary's been in love with you all along. You always give Bud everything he wanted, and if you ask me, it looks like you was just ignoring Mary because Bud wanted her."

Hardeman set his cup down in surprise. "Sarah, you're a fool."

"Maybe Mary was, for waiting for you, but I ain't, because that's the way it is. I got eyes."

"And a mouth, too, Sarah. And right now you've got your foot in it."

"Maybe you are as dumb as you act," the old woman said tartly. "In that case, Mary is the fool for waiting for you."

Hardeman looked at the shrewd old woman in wonderment. There was little she didn't hear or see in this town, but he had no idea how she had come to know the thing he had hardly allowed himself to even think about. He had even kept himself from dwelling on the feeling he had for Mary Winslow, believing that she would look with little favor on a saloonman. He had danced with her at socials, had had dinner with the Winslows a few times—but he had kept his feelings to himself.

He wondered how right old Sarah could be about Mary's feelings toward him. If she only could be right!

He did not have time to dwell on the idea, for Winslow came hurriedly into the restaurant with a pistol bagging his coat pocket. His face was grave, his step determined.

"Trouble's popping in ragtown," Winslow said quickly. "They beat Rainey May up and rode him out of camp on a rail. They're headed this way to tear up things."

Hardeman tossed a coin on the counter and got up and went out with Winslow. The first bunch of the straggling army of laborers was pouring down the

road from ragtown like a horde of locusts.

"Got your clerks armed?" Hardeman asked. "Every man had better defend his own property first."

"Yeah."

"Don't shoot unless you have to. I'm going down and meet 'em when they hit Durbin's. They'll probably head for his place first."

CHAPTER V
Angry Mob

HE WENT down to Durbin's and went inside. Durbin was talking to his bartenders, checking out cash to be used for change. Hardeman looked around at the barmen, and then at the gamblers sitting around waiting for games to get going.

These were men who lived by the flip of a card, whose chances were tides constantly ebbing and flowing, and it was part of their business to show the world nothing on their faces. Though they, like everybory else, knew of the oncoming trouble, their faces showed him nothing. The cards were being dealt, and they sat and waited frozen-faced for their hands.

"Durbin," Hardeman said, "there's a ragtown mob on the way to town. If you don't want your place wrecked, close it up quick and hunt a hole. You wanted it high, wide and handsome—and it looks like you're going to collect on your bet."

Durbin's smile was cold behind his cigar. "So ragtown's got its back up, has it? Well, we don't have to worry. We've got a marshal to keep order. And I know, *Marshal*, you'll do your duty, won't you?"

"You're just one business man on this street," Hardeman snapped. "And one the town can do without."

Durbin laughed coldly. "Kinda puts you between a rock and a hard place, don't it, Hardeman? You'd drive me out if you could, but you've got to defend me. Well, if you can't keep order, I can. And if I have to, then it's your hide that's nailed to the barn door, because if I have to handle them, I sure am going to handle you afterward."

Hardeman did not answer this, for he heard the irregular tramp of hurrying feet. He turned and headed toward the swing doors—but before he reached them, they flung inward and half a dozen men were squeezing in, with a full crowd behind them.

"Your friends to see you, Durbin," Hardeman said coldly, then he met the first men.

"Watch it, boys," he cautioned them. "We can straighten this matter out—"

They would have none of his talk. A big Irishman in a red undershirt and black whiskers, let out a wild roar of pure deviltry, and shoved past Hardeman.

Back of Hardeman, Durbin said, "Look, Paddy, take it easy—"

The big Irishman swung his fist and knocked Durbin back against the bar. Durbin got to his feet. The barmen had armed themselves with sawed-off five-cent baseball bats, used to tamp cracked ice around the beer barrels, and they tossed half a dozen of these bats to the gamblers who had got up and come to the bar. Durbin went and picked up a bat. "Now," he said, "you boys want to play; come on."

The room was half full now, and other hard-fisted laborers were pushing and milling to get in through the doors. The pretty red and green windows tinkled inward in a thousand shards of splintered glass, and other men poured in.

Tables went over; somebody hurled a chair at the backbar mirror and a bunch turned the bar over backwards at the same time. The sound of clubs on heads, and the howls of the men and the smell of the leaking beer tap filled the room. Hardeman was fighting hand to hand with half a dozen men packed in so tightly that they had little room to move.

"The bull of the woods himself," one of the laborers shouted, seeing his star, and started toward Hardeman. "I'll take him." Others looked at him and tried to lay hands on him.

Hardeman warned them back, but they surged upon him and drove him back against the wall. He rolled away

from them and pushed out to get through them, but they flung him back again. They were giving him a beating, but he put his arms up and shoved through them. His fist cracked one jaw and sent a man down, he caught another by the hair and drove his fist into his face, and that man fell.

Somebody got behind him, arms encircled his neck—and blows still rained on him. The crowd was shouting. Hardeman twisted around suddenly, his slow anger rising now against these hoodlums, and he tore into the man with his two fists until the man staggered away.

These workmen were on the warpath—they were without reason, without sense. Their resentment at Durbin's crooked games, his doped whisky and the highjackings that could be laid at his door, had erupted into a senseless fury, and they were going to take it out on whoever stood before them. To them the law and the town were one, and they were here to wreck the whole works.

HARDEMAN grew angry at their senseless mob violence, and his sympathy for them left him when he saw how these men acted. There was no fear in him, only a cold, quick rage.

Another man was on him now with a savage attack, and he gave his attention to this man. He drove him back against the wall and beat the man, just above the belt with his two fists until the man's knees buckled and he slid to the ground.

By now still another was pounding Hardeman on the back, while more of them were trying to get to him. Hardeman whirled and brought his gun out.

"That's enough of this, you fools," he barked.

He laid his gunbarrel over the head of the nearest man, and then the next, and he swung his gun like a club on heads and faces, and by the sheer power and fury of his blows he cut a path through the storming men and drove a dozen of them out onto the street before him.

Durbin had somehow managed to push his way through the crowd to the front door, where he caught up with Hardeman. His hair was disheveled and blood trickled down the corner of his mouth from his busted nose. He was getting out and leaving his men to defend his place. He caught Hardeman by the arm.

"They're wrecking my place," he yelled. "Twenty thousand dollars they're destroying. Do something! It's your doings, and your business to stop 'em."

"You've been begging for it; now take it," Hardeman answered. "There's others need help."

He turned his back on Durbin, and Durbin's yells and threats were lost in the noise of the street fighting.

He caught up a horse standing at the hitch rack and mounted, and now he could see over the heads of the milling men on the street, and make out the course of the battle. It was worse than he had expected. There must have been close to two hundred of the laborers from the camp, and there were half a dozen pitched battles going on up and down in front of the stores.

The whole street presented lines of broken windows, and storekeepers fighting off the yelling, frenzied men who had turned to looting. Old Mike Murphy and his son had closed and barred the doors of the Fair Deal, and both were on the roof of the saloon, protected waist high by the false front, and with their sawed-off shotguns aimed at a cluster of men who were crowded in front of the door.

The Murphy men had their crowd halted. Old Mike's voice came floating down, and there was a touch of the old Irish joy at a brawl, despite his respectability.

"You can start your looting when you want," Old Mike yelled at them. "But the first four of yez that takes a step toward that door gets buckshot full in your hides. Who'll be first?"

The muzzles of those two shotguns quenched the thirst of the mob in front of Murphy's.

Two other small saloons had fallen under the hands of the rioters, and the men from ragtown were tossing tables and chairs out of the places and making a bonfire with them in the middle of the street, and now Durbin's wrecked fixtures were joining the pile.

Further down, Winslow's clerks were lined up on the walk awning, with Winslow at their head, and they all held guns on the mob that was trying to make a

break for his show windows. A few men fired over the heads of the mob, but the citizens were not shooting to kill.

Hardeman sat his horse and gauged the fury of the mob. The most of their anger had been vented on Durbin's and the other two saloons where the games were known to be crooked. Their loss could well be spared. And now with their first rage sated, the ragtown men's mood was changing from anger to a kind of picnic spirit as they burned the poker tables, slot machines and fixtures of the crooked saloons, and passed around the bottles of looted liquor. Their rage was no longer pent-up, but was expressed and, feeding on itslf, would soon consume itself.

Hardeman pushed his horse over to the crowd in front of Murphy's and looked down upon the yelling men, his pistol in his hand. It was the first time he had taken it from its holster, since he left Durbin's place.

ANY ONE of them could have shot him, and some of them were probably armed. But there was something so commanding about him as he sat exposed thus in contempt of them that it cowed them, and their yells died down to grumblings and then to silence. That was the way it always was with men who were used to obeying orders when they recognized the presence of a strong man.

"You men have had your fun," he told them. "Now get back to your camp. The town's closed for the night, but after this it will be open with honest games until midnight. Now get on and behave yourselves."

The men saw his star, and they glared up at him, and a few tried to arouse enough spirit to drag him off his horse. But it would not work—he had command of them, and not one of them would make the first move. But neither would they make a move to go to their camp.

And then out of the darkness came a hard voice.

"All right, Hardeman, this was your doings. I'm collecting my bet from you. Here I am, look at me and see what's coming to you!"

Hardeman's hand rested on his hip while his eyes searched the terrain around him.

"Hardeman!" It was Durbin's voice again. "I'm up here. Look!"

Hardeman's eyes did not go to the roof, instead they focused on the mouth of the alley across the street from the saloon. And then his gun came up with the speed of light.

He fired once—in the direction of the alley.

Basil Denton came running out of the dark alley on mincing feet, his raised pistol gradually sinking downward as his steps faltered. And then his knees doubled under him and he went down into the dust. His part of Durbin's whipsaw scheme had backfired on him in the alley.

Then came a second shot—and it knocked Hardeman off his horse. He hit the ground and rolled over with his gun in his hand, and fired once. His bullet hit Durbin just as the saloon keeper on the roof started to fire his rifle the second time.

Durbin teetered over the edge of the

[Turn page]

roof. His rifle fell and clattered on the sidewalk, and then his body slid over the edge of the roof and turned over once lazily as he fell the two flights to the ground.

Hardeman was down, and the horse had bolted. He got to his knees, and then to his feet. Colin Murphy and old Mike shinnied down off their roof, and joined him as he kept the crowd covered. As they got the little bunch moving, other storemen with guns herded their small bunches of rioters into the main herd, and were driving them down the street toward their camp.

The mob was soon being driven by half a dozen men with shotguns who were lined up across the street, making a solid wall behind them. The riot was broken; the crooked saloons were bonfires. And a load lifted from Hardeman's mind and his conscience. The wound which he had ignored asserted itself and he passed out.

When he regained consciousness he was in a bed in a room in the hotel and Winslow and his daughter were there and the doctor and old Mike Murphy were just leaving.

"You're sure hard to kill, marshal," the old doctor said. "A few inches higher and that bullet would have passed right through your heart."

Hardeman barely heard it. He was trying to grasp something he thought he should remember. And then he was studying the look on Mary Winslow's face and he thought he recognized a deep anxiety behind her violet eyes. He smiled at her and saw the anxiety tempered by her wonderful smile and all in a breath he knew what it was he was trying to remember.

"Come here," he invited.

She knelt by the bed and put her warm hand over his.

"Was that—that kiss by your gate just brotherly affection too?" he asked.

Old Winslow cleared his throat. "Guess I'll be running along," he said.

"I don't know," Mary said. "Can't you figure it out for yourself?"

"I'm going, Mary," Winslow said, a little louder.

"It's hard to tell," Jim admitted. "Maybe if I could have another sample —"

Old Winslow decided to go without further formalities. He closed the door very gently behind him and tiptoed down the hall. Mary and Jim did not hear him go. She had leaned over and pressed her lips to his again and this time there was no doubt at all about the kind of affection she was offering him. There was nothing brotherly about it at all.

Jim Hardeman sighed with satisfaction. The bullet had missed his heart. But there was a certain little arrow, shot by a fat boy without clothes, that had scored a direct hit.

FEATURED IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

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GIRL BOSS OF THE TUMBLING Y

A Fascinating Romantic Action Novelet

By NELS LEROY JORGENSEN

CHRISTIE of Nine Mile Canyon

by STEPHEN PAYNE

That tenderfoot gal thought she'd teach those X L waddies a lesson— but she found she had to do it the hard way!

THE slam of a door and the sound of feet on gravel in the yard brought Christine Clark to the window of her room. When she had arrived at the X L ranch half an hour before, no one had been in sight. "Boys are eating dinner in the cook shack," her uncle had explained and Christine had experienced an odd feeling of disappointment.

For so long she had had a mind's eye picture of this ranch on which her mother had been brought up; cowboys catching and saddling spirited horses, or working with cattle. But her first look at her uncle's ranch had revealed

nothing more exciting than indolent cats, friendly dogs, and strutting turkey gobblers.

"It's mighty nice that you've come out West at last," Lester Laws had said to his niece, earlier. "And remember, the X L is to be your home for always if you'll stay with me."

Now that Christine's dream had come true, she hoped the cowboys would be her friends; sort of like big brothers who'd "teach her the ropes" and ask her to ride after cattle and go on roundups, and hunt and fish with them.

Through her window she was now getting her first look at the X L cowboys as they spilled out into the yard. They ranged in size from a bandy-legged little fellow to a couple of six-footers whose virile good looks caught and held Christine's breathless attention.

Then a half-mocking, half-envious voice drifted through the still, midday air. "Like you always does, I s'pose you'll be larnin' the tenderfoot to ride, Alan? Well, this one'd oughta suit you. The squint I got at her as the old man helped her outa the station wagon showed she's a knockout."

A shrug lifted the shoulders of one of the two six-shooters. Christine saw that he had brown hair with reddish lights, wide-apart eyes, good nose, and a mouth that quirked humorously. "Not jealous, are you, Parks? There's times it's not much fun trying to teach tenderfoot females to ride, like when the gal's hefty as the one who helped the cook last winter. Gosh, I 'most let her crash when her horse shied and she yelled and started to fall."

"Alan don't think so much of these helpless gals, does he?" jibed another rannie. "Thinks they just clutter up the old X L. Well, maybe, but I'd like to be in Alan's shoes sometimes—like right now."

"Looks to the rest of us as if you do a good deal of catching tenderfoot gals, Alan Royce," the other tall cowboy, whose dark complexion, thin lips and sharp nose gave him a saturnine appearance, spoke up suddenly. "Why not lay off once in a while and give someone else a chance? It might save some broken female hearts."

Christine quietly closed the window and sat down abruptly. The cowboys she had dreamed of having for pals were quarreling already about taking the tenderfoot gal riding.

Well, she'd let the philandering waddies teach her to ride! She'd hook their interest, and unless she was far more unattractive than she had been told she was, in the end it wouldn't be her heart that was broken. How she did want to see pieces of Alan's and Fritz's hearts scattered around the X L!

WHEN they were eating their belated dinner, "What can we do for you first, young lady?" Christine's uncle asked her. "I reckon some of the boys'll be driftin' around after supper to do the honors. Fine fellows, my rannies. I'll back 'em against any bunch of cowboys in the whole U.S."

"Tell me something about them," suggested Christine. "So I'll have some idea what each of them like and dislike."

When rancher Laws and his niece had finished their meal, Christine knew that the old X L foreman was going to "retire" at the end of the summer, and that the choice of his successor lay between Alan Royce and Fritz Norris.

"Fritz," Lester Laws explained, "is more of a hustler than Alan. At times he's a regular dynamo, and drives everyone like mad. But he often doesn't get the necessary cooperation, while Alan quietly organizes what he's going to do so it goes off like clock-work."

"How do they rate with girls?" Christine asked.

Her uncle smiled behind his mustache. "Some like 'em dark like Fritz; some light like Alan. All the girls like 'em, but neither's definitely spoken for, far as I've heard. By the way, Christie, I intend quite soon to send those two after a herd of cattle I've bought near Redstone."

Before nine o'clock that evening Christine had met the X L waddies, from bandy-legged Parks, who plucked a mean banjo and sang a melancholy tenor, to dashing Fritz Norris, who told her that he had been looking for her all his life, and Alan Royce, who paid her no compliments and apparently forgot her until the end of the evening

when he drew her out on the wide veranda, splotched with lacy shadows and silver moonlight.

"Listen," he began in a lazy drawl which both intrigued and incensed Christine. "It's gotten to be a tradition that any gal who's staying on the X L must learn to ride, and I'm the one who teaches 'em. When can you take your first lesson?"

Christie's scalp prickled under the bright cap of her rippling hair. Just like that! Not even asking if she could ride, or whether she wanted to learn, or cared to have him teach her! Was he so darned conceited he thought any girl would fall for him on first sight?

"That's awfully kind of you." Purposely she tipped back her head so the moonlight illuminated the soft oval of her face and added sparkle to her large gray eyes. "If you think I won't be too much trouble. You know, a tenderfoot can be terribly awkward. Sometimes afraid of falling, too. Though I'm sure you wouldn't let me fall."

She saw a sudden leap of interest transform his earlier rather bored indifference, and knew her first attempt definitely to hook his interest had succeeded. "Look here," he said, his voice roughened and his eyes warm with some new emotion. "You ought to learn fast. You're slim and straight, and light and quick when you move. I'll bet you're not afraid to try anything."

"You're right," she flashed back, a double meaning in the words which Alan didn't understand. "I'm not afraid. Unless you frighten me by—"

BEFORE she had quite finished, he pulled her to him, gently yet masterfully. Looking into her startled face, he said huskily, "I don't ever want to frighten you, Christie. Because I want you to—"

Steps behind them made Alan drop his arms, leaving Christine to wonder whether he would have kissed her. Yet furious for allowing herself to wish that he had. She was sure he was only playing that he cared for her.

"Hi there, Alan," said Fritz Norris in a quite unpleasant tone. "You've had plenty time to get in your play about teaching Miss Clark to ride. Give me another chance to talk to her. . . . Think you'll like riding, lovely?" tucking her hand under his arm in a proprietary manner and leading her to the door.

"Of course," said Christine. "But I think I ought to have a chance to try more than one teacher." It was a deliberate challenge; one which Fritz accepted with alacrity.

"You said it, sweetness. I'll be only too happy to give you the benefit of anything I know."

She thought Alan had gone inside. But he had followed them to the door, and now said, "You'll take your first ride tomorrow evening, Christie? Right after supper? O.K."

"Then the next evening will be my turn," put in Fritz, quickly and triumphantly. "This time, old horse, I'm cutting in on your monopoly."

Had Christine not resolved she'd teach these two cowboys a lesson, she would have refused the attentions of either one. Yet her first riding lesson ended without any attempt on Alan's part to presume on her awkwardness.

"See," he said, giving her instructions in an entirely impersonal manner, "you hold the reins in your left hand like this, on the horse's neck, close to the saddle. Stand close to his front leg and turn the stirrup. Put your left foot into it, grab the saddlehorn with your right hand and spring up. . . . Like this," vaulting lightly to the horse's back. "Now you try it. I'll hold your pony so he won't start."

Here, thought the girl, was Alan's chance to put his arms around her and lift her into the saddle. But he merely steadied her arm as she followed his instructions, and although she would have been furious if he had tried the tactics she had expected, nevertheless his impersonal manner irritated her.

Even when they were out on the trail, Alan confined his conversation to remarks about the country and pointing out interesting views and landmarks. She knew she was riding much better than an ordinary beginner, yet the cowboy voiced neither admiration nor approval.

Evening had slipped into night before they returned to the X L. Alan dismounted first, and stood beside Chris-

tine's pony, telling her how to get out of her saddle and to the ground. Piqued by his indifference, she wondered whether Alan Royce was really immune to the witchery of moonlight magic and an attractive girl.

Swaying toward the cowboy, she implored him, "Help me, Alan, please!"

His fingers bit into her as he lifted her briskly to the ground. "So you're like all the rest, are you? And I'd believed you were different." He seized her by her shoulders and shook her hard. "You're just like all the others," he repeated between clenched teeth, "ornamental, but helpless."

Almost crying from anger and mortification, Christine jerked away and ran into the house.

WHEN Fritz brought her pony around the next evening she gave him her most brilliant smile. "There's so much I want to learn," she said enigmatically. But she was in the saddle before he could give her any assistance.

"You certainly learned fast for one lesson, girlie," he commented admiringly. "A few more and you'll be ready to try trick riding. I'll teach you about it, too."

"It's easier for me to mount than to dismount," said Christine with assumed innocence, and the gleam in Fritz's eyes told her that he caught her inference.

Other things besides the horses moved fast this evening. Almost too fast. Fritz considered himself quite adept at interesting a girl, and even on horseback he made caressing gestures. "You're the swellest little bunch of sweetness that ever hit the old X L, Christie," he said softly, and caught her hand and lifted it to his lips. "You've done something to me I thought no girl could ever do. Can you ever feel the same way toward me?" trying to pull her toward him.

Christine's hand burned from his hot lips, and she wanted to run away from him, which, she thought, was very silly when she had been angry with Alan for displaying no romantic interest. "Oh, it's too soon to talk about the future," she said lightly. "Just now I want to learn all about ranching and riding."

"Sure," agreed Fritz with a wise grin. "The rest can come later."

Although he told many interesting stories about things he had seen, Fritz brought himself so prominently into all of it that Christine found more interest in the scenery than in her companion's conversation. No wonder her uncle and Alan and Fritz all loved this country, so beautiful and wild.

Still in a half-dreamy state, they were again on the ranch before she remembered her remark about its being easier to mount her pony than to dismount. Fritz had not forgotten it. Reaching up, he plucked her from the saddle, and then his lips were on hers in a demanding kiss.

"You're the one girl in the world for me, Christie," he said, his voice husky. "And we both belong here on the old X L, don't we, sweetness?"

No wonder Alan had told Fritz his kisses were "explosive." To Christine, distastefully explosive. Yet in carrying out her resolve, she had brought this on herself. Now she wondered whether she might seem to be a special prize who could influence her uncle's choice of foreman. A special prize? Her cheeks burned as she recalled how Alan had said she was ornamental but helpless.

"Good night, Fritz," she said, struggling out of his arms and hurrying up the steps to the house. "And thank you for all you have taught me," she added with sharp emphasis.

From the living room, her uncle called, "Sit down and talk to me, my dear." He motioned to a chair near his. "It's so comfortable to know there's someone around now who belongs to me, Christie. However, an attractive young girl doesn't usually stay single with so many young fellows falling in love with her. You'll more'n likely soon find 'the one'."

"Uncle Les, you're having brain storms," Christine protested, blushing. "I'm not in love with anyone."

"Glad to hear it, little girl, because I want you to be careful to pick one who's really worthy, not one who merely sees the X L heiress as a big prize."

A moment later Alan came in the front door. With a warm glance which

singled her out like the flash of a beacon, he said a quiet, "Good evening," and then to his boss, "If it's okay with you, I'll take Christine to see Nine Mile Canyon tomorrow evening. The Canyon's the most rugged place nearby. The most beautiful too."

The older man gave a snort. "Beautiful? Humph! Still, the trail through it, such as it is, is a short cut across the range between here and Redstone. Which reminds me, Alan, I want you and Fritz to go and get the three hundred young steers I've bought near Redstone. You'll start day after toworrow, and it'll be up to you boys to decide whether or not to take the long way 'round on your return trip or come through that doggoned canyon. It's a heck of a place!"

Christine tilted her head mischievously. "Since I've never seen a place like that, Uncle Les, it's the one place I must see. Then I can decide whether Alan or you is right."

HER first look at Nine Mile Canyon, on the following evening, convinced Christine she had never seen Nature so beautiful. The westering sun was spilling its brilliance on red and yellow and gray rocks of the eastern ramparts and the play of lights and shadows made the wide, deep gorge an enchanted place.

Alan heard her thrilled gasp and smiling at her profile he said, "I thought you'd like this, Christine. The flowers and shrubs are like paintings that ornament the back drops of stage scenery."

"It's like a fairy land, or a scene from a play," she enthused. "Only it's real. How can shrubs and cedars and flowers live when it doesn't seem as if there was any place for them to put down roots in all this rock?"

"It is strange how living things can do the seemingly impossible," he answered in an odd tone. "I'd have thought it impossible for you, a tenderfoot, to learn to ride well so quickly."

"Oh, that?" Christine laughed, and flashed another question. "Is the canyon narrow like this all the way?" looking from the rushing creek close to the trail to the towering walls on either side.

"Like most mountain canyons, it widens in spots. Near the crest of the range, however, there's a mile and a half stretch we call 'The Narrows'. The walls come close together and rise straight up for about five hundred feet on both sides. The creek rushes down a rocky gorge and there's only a single-file trail hanging on the edge of a cliff. Spooky place. Horses hate to go through it and it panicks cattle. However, we'll not see The Narrows tonight."

"I'd not want to see this spooky place in the dark anyhow," said Christine. "Can't we get off here and walk around for a few minutes?"

She started to dismount and through some freakish chance caught the top of her riding boot in the stirrup leather. Remembering the result of her pretended awkwardness that first night, she choked back her appeal for help and jerked frantically on the bridle reins. The startled pony began to back and shy, throwing Christine out of balance. She had visions of being thrown from the saddle with a foot caught, and being dragged at the heels of a runaway pony, when two strong arms caught her and a stern "Whoa, Blaze!" stopped the skittish pony.

Instead of setting her on solid ground, however, Alan held her hard against his tall, steel-spring body. When she raised her eyes to his, she read in them a message that sent through her a thrill like nothing she had ever before experienced. Breathless with anticipation, she awaited the compelling pressure of Alan's lips against her own which left her tremulous and shaken.

"Sweetheart," he said at last. "Christie darling! If it hadn't been for Blaze —and for you being so—"

"Awkward? you were about to say?" Christie finished for him, recalling that first conversation she had overheard. "You like an awkward pupil, don't you? And you consider a kiss full payment for any fright she has?"

ALAN'S ardent expression changed; his lips drew to a straight, hard line. "How well you guessed," he answered. "Even a gal who pretends to fall rates the same as the one who isn't putting on an act." He regarded her with open hostility.

"Why did you come here anyhow?" he asked. "You can never really belong. Because you're beautiful and appealing you upset a fellow and make him lose his horse sense. You can't take the sort of life on a ranch he has to, and anybody who thinks different is crazy. No, you can't take it!"

Had Alan slapped her, Christine could have felt no greater storm of anger. She raised her hand to strike his face, and held it. "He expects me to hit him," ran her thought, "so he'll feel smugly justified in trying to kiss me again. Well, someday I will teach him the lesson he needs. I can take it!"

Forgetting the reason for their stopping, they remounted and rode out of the canyon in a silence which Christine at last tore apart with, "You expected me to put on an act?"

The other's cool glance touched her lightly. "To tell the truth, I didn't. Was I wrong?" He reached over and caught her hand roughly. "Perhaps I have you all wrong, Christie. How I hope that's the way of it, for I'm afraid I care more for you than is good—for either of us."

Before Christine went to sleep that night, those words kept repeating themselves. Did Alan mean that he had come to care for her, or was it merely philandering? Were all good-looking cowboys philanderers? She was sure about Fritz, but Alan still piqued her pride and interest.

The following morning she felt provoked and hurt when Alan did not come to tell her good-by and Fritz did. The tall, dark cowboy was beaming.

"The boss's putting me in charge of bringing home the cattle from Redstone is a big feather in my cap, girlie. It shows how the old man banks on me."

"Where does Alan come in?" Christine asked.

"He'll be taking orders from me. And I don't think he'll like it. This makes me almost sure of being the next foreman of X L, although even that's not enough to satisfy this rannie. Shall I tell you what will satisfy me, lovely?" Fritz snatched at Christine's hand, but she forestalled him.

"Will you bring the cattle home through Nine Mile Canyon?" she asked.

"That trail's the short cut, and I'll be in a terrific yank to get home," he said with obvious meaning. "Doggone, the boss is hollering for me to get along. Be seeing you in just three days, Christie. One day to get to Redstone, two to get back."

FOR the greater part of those next three days, Christine found herself restless, stirred by strange emotions and yearnings. It seemed as if Alan and Fritz were always in her thoughts, and often she found herself gazing toward the high ramparts of the mountain range where it was cut by the dark and awesome gash which was Nine Mile Canyon. At noon of the third day Uncle Les surprised her while she was frowning worriedly at thunderheads up above the mountains.

"Looks as if you're a mite worried about one or t'other of those cowboys, Christie," he said with a laugh.

"I was only wondering about a storm in Nine Mile."

"Heck! They'll take the long trail home. The safe trail."

"Are you sure, Uncle Les?"

"W-well, darn it, I'm not real sure. Alan Royce has got a right strong liking for that treacherous canyon. He jus' might. If he does, it'll show how little sense he's got and he'll never get to be foreman."

"Tell me, Uncle Les, which of the two did you actually put in charge?"

"Alan was boss of this drive. Does that surprise you, my dear?"

The girl did not answer, and Lester Laws continued, "It's lonely for you around here since I sent all the rannies to help Matt Kingston brand his calves. I've got to go to town right away and won't be home till late. Like to come along, Christie?"

Christine thanked her uncle, but said "No." She watched him leave and again the mountains drew her eyes as a magnet draws metal. On their heights the clouds had deepened and blackened, flashes of vivid lightning made fireworks across the dark skyline, and it looked as if the crest of the range was being drenched with pounding hail.

Worry and fear bit into the girl. Uncle Les didn't think Fritz and Alan would

come home by that dangerous trail. She believed they would, and with such a frightening storm upon them they were almost sure to be in trouble. Impulsively, Christine added a slicker to her riding habit, put on an old cowboy hat to protect her hair and face, and told the cook,

"I'm going to ride up the canyon a little way, Mrs. Blake."

"Now don't you go so far as them Narrows, dearie," advised the cook. "Goodness, but they say that's a spooky place," and she shuddered.

Christine laughed, "Don't worry. I won't get that far," adding hopefully to herself, "By the time I get there the boys'll probably be coming with the herd. As soon as I hear them, I'll turn around and hurry home. I don't want them to get the idea they're so important in my life I'd come to meet them."

Rain began falling before she reached Nine Mile Canyon, and although night was still several hours off, Christine had the impression she was riding through liquid darkness.

On and on she rode, straining her eyes as she rounded each turn. But she saw no cattle nor heard any sound of the herd. Birds and squirrels and other small denizens of mountain country were inactive today, and the voice of the stream which tumbled down the canyon and the reverberations of recurring thunder were the only sounds in this awesome, high-walled gorge.

CHRISTINE reined in Blaze and hesitated. She had passed through that part of the canyon which she had ridden with Alan, which meant she must have come five miles or more. Perhaps she should now turn back.

She was still undecided when a distant flicker like firelight playing against a rock wall suddenly caught her attention. Attracted by the light, she rode on.

The trail leading on through the canyon now rose above the level of the stream and held to the right along an eyebrow ledge. The fire she had noticed was on a ledge to the left. Between, there lay a maze of brush and tumbled rocks, and the creek bed, filled with muddy, rushing water.

Trying to pierce the rain and gloom, Christine peered toward the fire. All at once she gave a start of sheer astonishment, for, safe and protected from the storm by a ledge of overhanging rocks, she saw Fritz Norris. His saddle horse stood nearby, and to Christine's further astonishment, she saw the cowboy unsaddle the animal, place the saddle near the fire and spread out the saddle blanket, then stretch out on this skimpy bed as if intending to take a night's rest.

There was no evidence of either Alan Royce or of the cattle. Christine shouted, but the noise of the stream would have been enough to drown her voice without the incessant thunder. With puzzled lines between her brows, and her lips tight, she looked to find some way across to where Fritz was so sheltered and so comfortable. Discovering that this was impossible in the darkness, she decided that Alan and the cattle should not be so far away, and rode on.

Although the rain slackened, the creek rose higher, minute by minute. Full darkness caught her before she reached a high-walled gorge which she was sure must be The Narrows. Blaze balked and tossed his head, as much as to say, "I'm not going into that dark hole."

Christine herself almost lost her courage until there came to her the thought, "It looks as if Frtiz skipped out and left Alan alone with the cattle. However much Alan and I have misunderstood each other, I'll do my best to help him. Perhaps he'll learn that this tenderfoot gal can take it," she added rather grimly.

Urging the pony forward, she found that in the darkness she must trust to Blaze's ability to stay on the trail. The roar of the stream and the crash of thunder beat continually against her ears; the intermittent glare and shimmer of lightning were terrifying. Yet finally—it seemed to Christine a thousand years later—Blaze came out of the spooky Narrows into an open basin high atop the mountain world.

The ground was white with fresh hail against whose whiteness she made out the dark mass of a herd of restless cattle. The next moment, she heard Alan's lusty baritone singing to the cattle, and when Christine reached the herd she found she had let herself in for a job.

THE frantic cattle seemed bent on taking flight in every direction except toward the gloomy, tunnel-like opening of The Narrows. Christine found however that Blaze was a clever cowpony. Instantly he was leaping right and left to turn animals back into the herd.

"Hi!" The figure of a man astride a horse loomed beside her. "Who are you?"

"Can't you see it's me, Christie?"

"Christie! You here?" as if he could not believe it. "How did a tenderfoot like you make such a ride in this storm? Did you see Fritz?"

"Yes, I saw Fritz. He was camped comfortably beside a fire, under a ledge of rocks."

She heard Alan's indrawn breath, but he made no comment. There was a lapse of several minutes before he was again close enough for her to ask, "What happened?"

Alan returned, "I don't know." His voice was heavy with anger. "We were getting along fine with the herd until we hit The Narrows early this morning. We should have been at the ranch by early afternoon, but along here the jug-headed critters balked and spooked.

"Maybe you've seen cattle balk at crossing an ice-locked river? This was ten times worse. If we'd had another man or two we could have forced the dogies into The Narrows. As it was, we were helpless. Stumped. So, about noon, I asked Fritz to hustle to the ranch and bring back some help and a half-dozen extra horses. He should have been back here with help before dark."

Alan was dashing away again, and his voice, hoarse from shouting and singing, came rather faintly, "If we'd had a few loose horses to throw in ahead of the cattle and lead them we'd have got them strung out all right."

It was an hour later, every minute of which she and Alan were busy, before they had another chance to talk. "Did Fritz tell you why he hadn't gone on to the ranch?" Alan asked.

"I couldn't cross the canyon to talk to him. Why was he—"

Thunder drowned Christine's voice. A new storm, accompanied by stinging hail, ripped out of the black night to punish the riders, their horses and the milling cattle.

As the hail beat against her, Christine was thankful for her slicker and sturdy old hat. Never had she even imagined such an ordeal as holding spooky cattle in a thunder storm at night. It seemed that it must be a grim and frightful nightmare out of which she'd soon wake to find it was all unreal.

But it was real. She was constantly using her voice and her quirt to head off runaway cattle and try to hold them in a compact herd. Three times Alan came to her, shouting encouragement. "That-a-girl, Christie! I never could save this herd if you weren't here."

WHEN daylight at last streaked the eastern horizon, the clouds began to break with the passing of the storm. The cattle quieted and stood in a sullen steaming bunch. Christine was so terribly weary she wished she might roll out of her saddle and stretch her limp body on the hail-plastered earth. When Alan's horse weaved toward her at a snail's pace, she saw that the cowboy was almost as worn out as his mount.

Yet there was triumph and pride in Alan's voice, as he said, "Thanks to you, Christie, we saved the herd! Why did you try to make me believe that you couldn't ride? Was that playing fair?"

She gave him a long, straight look, and smiled faintly. "You didn't ask me, Alan. I hadn't been on the X L ten minutes before I overheard you and the rannies talking about teaching 'tenderfoot gals' to ride. I wanted to teach *you* something, because I felt you were all making me a butt of your fun, but I didn't know how I'd be proving that I 'can take it.' Do you still think I can't?"

"Christie darling, you have taught me something. Something bigger than a riding lesson. You've shown me how wrong I was in not believing what I wanted to believe from the first, that you're dead game in a crisis. You've also taught me to love you. . . . Sweetheart, don't tell me that it's hopeless!"

Their horses drew closer together as Christine leaned toward him. "I love you, too, Alan," she said simply. "Although I tried not to."

She lifted her lips to meet his, and again she felt the tingling ecstasy of his tender, demanding kisses. But this time she knew they meant what she had wanted them to mean. In the ordeal of last night she and Alan had discovered their undying love.

SOME indefinite time later, after Christine had released herself from Alan's hungry embrace, she cried, "See! There comes Uncle Les with Parks and Sim. They've brought extra horses, too. But I don't see Fritz."

Lester Laws' big voice reached out. "Thank Heaven you're safe, Christie! The cook's memory isn't her best trait and I didn't know until just before we left that you'd ridden out in last night's storm. So you helped Alan hold the cattle? Good work—both of you."

"You can thank Christie for saving this herd," Alan put in. "And how she can ride!"

Christine gave her uncle a mischievous, if tired smile. "I learned to ride long ago, but played greenhorn to fool Alan and Fritz."

"Where is Fritz?" Alan asked sharply. "I take full responsibility for starting the cattle on this canyon trail, Mr. Laws. But it wasn't storming then, and when the herd balked I sent Fritz for help. He should have been back here before dark."

"'Should have been back before dark'?" repeated Lester Laws. "I smelled a rat when Fritz showed up this morning with a phony story about his horse getting away from him and his having put in most of the afternoon and night trying to catch it."

Christine gave Alan a quick, understanding glance. "At last I see what Fritz was up to. You see through his wicked scheme, too, don't you, Uncle Les?"

"I think I do," snapped the ranchman. "Fritz talked too much. He said Alan was a fool for taking the short cut. He himself had done his best to get help before night, and nobody could blame him if the cattle got away from Alan during the night.

"In fact the fellow came right out and said, 'I reckon you'll fire Alan for bungling and for letting the herd get away from him?' But, I told the counterfeit, 'If you'd walked all night, hunting your horse, your boots would show it. Besides, you'd be played out and you're fresh as a daisy.' Then I fired him. Alan, my boy, you've earned the job of foreman of the X L. That please you, Christie?" not giving Alan a chance to thank him.

"You know it does, Uncle Les!" Christine's answer was complete delight. "You're wonderful to have seen through Fritz and what a wicked trick he had in mind."

"You're pretty wonderful yourself," the old cowman began.

"With that I fully agree," Alan put in quickly. Moving his horse alongside the girl's he put his arm around her and kissed her again while three smiling men watched with undisguised approval.

Next Issue. RIDE A TWISTED TRAIL, a novelet by Melvin Gable

Susan the Ute

By HAROLD PREECE

Susan and her son behold the tragedy

The true story of a famed woman of the West — Susan Johnson, courageous squaw who befriended palefaces and hated violence!

OUT in the thicket, the dry wind was whipping up dust and Ute war drums were whipping up death.

In the White River Reservation council house, angry voices rose and fell with the drums. And Susan Johnson, the squaw, felt that all men — white and red — were fools as she faced the council, that tense, ominous day of September, 1879.

She had tried to stop the fool white

man, Indian Agent Nathan Meeker, from starting the trouble. Now, she was trying to stop these fool redmen like her husband, War Chief Andrew Johnson, from finishing it.

She was risking death by torture by fire, for invading the sacred meeting-place of the chiefs. It had been a thousand years, in the legends of the old men, since any woman had risked and suffered the penalty.

Susan the squaw spoke uncertainly, as she wore uncertainly the paleface clothes, bought for her by Mrs. Meeker, at Colorado Springs.

"Fathers of our people," she said in the Ute tongue, "the drums talk folly with our tongues. The paleface has conquered us. It is the will of the Great Spirit that we break bread and not bows with the paleface.

"Or else we have no bread. For the villages of the paleface cover the hunting grounds. And the bones of our warriors are strewn with the bones of the buffalo.

"It was my son who shot the plowman. It was my son who shall go to the Indian school and learn the new ways that bring peace for the old ways that brought war. So the paleface squaw, Mrs. Meeker, has promised if the council speaks peace. Then the paleface chief will order back the soldiers, and the drums shall talk wisdom like our tongues."

Drums Call for War

The drums roared like thunder, and her voice was lost in their cry for blood. Chief Johnson stood up, his face smeared with the red clay that served the Utes as war paint. Susan Johnson went staggering back as his hammer hand swung out and knocked her against the aspenwood wall of the council house.

"Sooner," he roared, "shall the deer ask wisdom of the lizard than chiefs of the Utes heed the words of a squaw. Sooner shall the son of a chief die by his father's hands than he unlearn the ways of his people in the paleface schools."

He turned to the chiefs. "We shall not strike unless the soldiers come. What say you, my brothers, if they come?"

Susan Johnson's father spoke first as the oldest chief.

"I who was called Bear King but who am called by the palefaces Frederick Douglass"—he spat out the new name like the tasteless dried ration beef—"say war!"

"War! War!" shouted the younger chiefs. And the drums in the thicket answered, "War!"

Susan Johnson stumbled out of the council house, praying to the Great Spirit to still the drums and the tongues.

There remained only a few broken bands of her people, scattered on reservations, miles apart, to keep them from uniting for war. She had been one of those who saw that the Utes must accept the paleface ways or die.

She'd noticed how the paleface reservation employees worked to support their families. She'd persuaded many of the Ute braves to take jobs digging an irrigation canal for the reservation. It was the first work they had ever done except scalp palefaces and shoot buffalo.

Corn Moon had followed Bizzard Moon. The braves were bringing home their fifteen dollars a month to their squaws. Beds and chairs were replacing the piles of dirty blankets in the Indian cabins. Susan's wise and kindly brother, Ouray, supreme chief of the Utes, had sent her words of praise from his reservation. Her husband, her father and her sixteen-year-old son, Lincoln Johnson, were among the die-hards who grumbled for the old days. But Susan hoped, with a woman's patience, that time would bring them around.

Then she had seen her work wrecked, not by the die-hards, but by the stern paleface who ran the reservation.

Nathan Meeker had ordered the Indians to stop racing their ponies on an eighty-acre strip of ground. He had set one of the Christian Utes to plowing the strip for crop-raising. Lincoln Johnson had shot and scalped the plowman in the middle of the first furrow.

Agent Calls Soldiers

Now Lincoln was in the reservation calaboose. And Nathan Meeker was punishing the whole tribe by bringing in the hated paleface soldiers.

"I must save my people," Susan John-

son was saying over and over again as she ran from the council house to the Agent's house. "I must save my son."

Nathan Meeker was sitting by an open window, his ears keyed to the wild throb of the drums. Near his sat his wife and his daughter, Josephine, their faces blanched with fear. As Susan stepped in, a feather-tipped arrow whizzed through the window and buried itself in the handsome mahogany piano.

"Quickly—put down window and move to corner!" Susan shouted above the screams of the white women. Then she confronted Nathan Meeker.

"Council say war if soldiers come. Go to talking-wire. You send another tap-tap talk. Tell soldiers to stay in fort."

Nathan Meeker's face glowered, but his lips were silent. Susan Johnson fumbled for the right words in the strange language.

"I no want my boy killed in fight," she pleaded. "Indian boys like young trees. You pull 'em up, plant 'em in new ground. They feel around new ground—bimeby get new roots. Then Indian boys grow fine like young trees."

Mrs. Meeker broke in: "Nathan, listen. Listen to Susan. The boy needs a school and not a jail. Susan's people need help and understanding, not soldiers and courts."

Nathan Meeker's voice was shaking with fury as he replied:

"A boy may be like a tree. But the tree that is rotten shall be plucked up and cast in the fire!"

A sudden salvo of the drums mocked his words. Another arrow flew toward the shut window, but dropped with a loud "ping" when it hit the glass pane.

Susan looked at the anxious, kindly face of Mrs. Meeker. She felt on surer ground when she gazed back again at the forbidding face of the Agent.

"You not know us too much," she said, as the drumbeats died down. "We not know you too much. It take long time make friends. Soldiers will stop all being friends. Utes what like new ways will fight 'longside Utes what like old ways if soldiers come.

"I take my boy and go Mexico. You turn back soldiers. Then no trouble."

Nathan Meeker's answer showed no yielding: "You're the best of them, Susan. But I'll not bargain even with the best. Law is law, and right is right. There's no friendship when both sides don't live strictly up to law and right."

Susan Plans to Save Son

As the Indian woman walked out the door, the drums were booming across the hills. Susan Johnson knew now that there would be no peace between white man and red man so long as pigheads like Agent Meeker spoke for one and pigheads like her husband for the other.

She doubted if she could save her people. She was determined to save her boy.

She hurried to her cabin. She set water to boiling for coffee. She reached on a shelf for a handful of dried herb roots. Then her strong hands pounded the roots into a fine brown powder. When the coffee was made, she poured the powder into an earthen pot. The powder dissolved instantly when it was tossed in the coffee.

A few minutes later, she was handing the pot to the Ute policemen guarding the calaboose. "Hot coffee!" she said. "Heap good. You drink while I go in see my boy."

At sundown, Nathan Meeker walked to the calaboose for an inspection. He saw only the shame-faced police staring into an empty cell.

"Susan bring us coffee," the head policeman confessed. "We drink. We go to sleep. We wake up. Her and boy gone."

Nathan Meeker's face froze in a grim Puritan mold. "She was the best," he repeated. "But even the best are treacherous dogs. Now the boy faces two charges—murder and escape. I'll have to ship her to the penitentiary with him for abetting escape."

He was humming a grim Puritan hymn when another arrow sang by his head and took away a lock of his steel-gray hair. And still the soldiers had not come.

For three days, Susan and young Lincoln hid under an overhanging rock on a mountain. On the afternoon of the third day, they looked down on the tragedy that history calls the White

River Massacre.

They saw the braves ride howling and shooting along the reservation's main street called Douglass Avenue after Susan's father. They saw the Agency office burst into a crackling blaze from a hundred flaming arrows. They watched the palefaces being slaughtered by the Ute warriors loaded with firewater and gunpowder. They saw Mrs. Meeker and Josephine flee through the sagebrush, only to be caught by a party of warriors under Chief Douglass.

Lincoln Johnson glimpsed his father, riding on a handsome pony, spitting death from his Winchester. The boy's voice rose in the ancient battle cry of the Utes. Then Susan's fist knocked the wind out of him.

He went down. And for a long, terrible minute, the young brave's scared eyes feared death at the hands of his own mother.

"Lie there till I bid you rise, young man who would be a dog," she cried. Then she turned back with sickened face to gaze at what was happening below. She guessed that the cunning chiefs had timed the attack before the soldiers should arrive from the far-distant fort.

Squaw Watches Raid

She strained her eyes to see what was happening in front of the building that she identified as the reservation comissary. She made out the figure of Nathan Meeker, rifle in hand, defending government property. Then she saw the figure fall. After which, redmen began hauling out blankets and barrels of flour.

Late that night, Susan and Lincoln, riding hard on their ponies, intercepted the war party as it headed south across the mountains. In the darkness, Susan's eyes found the three white women captives who had survived the massacre—Mrs. Meeker, Josephine, and a Mrs. Price. Josephine and Mrs. Price were sharing a pony. Mrs. Meeker rode behind Chief Douglass.

Susan made the low bow of a dutiful Ute squaw to her husband.

"Squaw should ride with squaw," she addressed him in the tribal tongue. "Let the old white squaw ride with me who am unworthy like her."

Johnson rasped a curt order in English. Mrs. Meeker dismounted from Douglass' horse and climbed on Susan Johnson's. She felt the comfort of woman with woman as she leaned her tired head on the strong shoulders of the chief's wife.

Susan reined her horse to a slow walk till the warriors were well ahead. She let her hands slack on the bridle and let the pony find its own way. Then she turned around and spoke to the white woman.

"No make 'em mad, no matter what they say. We ride to country of my brother, Ouray. He no like to fight palefaces."

Her sympathy was deep and earnest. "Your husband dead. But you still got good daughter. I still got bad son. But love my son all same. And me help him."

Then Mrs. Meeker realized how foolish her husband had been. If he had listened to Susan Johnson, he and the other reservation whites would still be alive. And the Indians would be his staunch friends, not his murderous enemies.

Susan was brave, and she was smart. She liked white man's ways, and she understood red man's ways. She'd listened eagerly when Nathan had told her white man's ways. But he'd turned away from "the confounded heathen nonsense" when she'd tried to tell him red man's ways.

"Susan the Ute is one of the great women of this wild country," decided Mrs. Meeker during the torturous week that followed. "One of the really great—even if she's only a poor squaw who can't sign her name to the picture postcards she buys in Colorado Springs."

Troops Press Closer

Hard days followed hard nights. Scouts continually rode in to report that now the soldiers were trailing the war party and were drawing ever closer.

The Indians grew tense and strained as their horses became tired and winded. Every night, the chiefs met in council. Every night, the pow-wow broke up in a bitter argument between Douglass and Johnson with the old chief wanting to head back and surrender. Johnson in-

sisted they should keep moving across the Rockies to Canada and safety.

Chief Douglass' squaw became sour and ill-humored toward her daughter, Susan, and the three white captives. She denied the paleface women food and blankets. But, somehow, the three were kept alive by Susan who slipped them dried meat and coarse, warm goatskins.

It was Susan who guarded the three against the nightly orgies of firewater. Whenever the Indians got tanked, they gathered around the paleface squaws to shout obscene songs in Ute, English and Spanish. Then the red woman would break through the mob and silently stand beside her white sisters. The songs would cease and the singers vanish.

On a cold, snowy night, the chiefs met to hear a messenger from Ouray, supreme chief of all the Utes.

The message minced no words. The White River Utes must surrender to the oncoming soldiers who would escort them back to their reservation. The captives must be treated kindly, and delivered to the five army officers who would arrive, next morning, to receive the surrender.

Johnson and Douglass were deposed as chiefs. They had their choice of doing hard labor for pay on the irrigation canal or doing it without pay in military prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Susan looked proudly at Mrs. Meeker when she heard the last part of the message. It said that Ouray had arranged for his nephew, Lincoln, to attend a government school for Indians.

The five officers arrived at dawn. Their head was the famous Civil War general, William Tecumseh Sherman. He turned over parleying with the Indians to his brother officer, General Adams. Then he sat down with the white women to hear their account of the massacre.

Mrs. Meeker beckoned to Susan. "General Sherman," she said, "I want you to meet a gallant lady whose name will always live in the West. This is Mrs. Susan Johnson who's long since forgotten her old name."

General Thanks Susan

Susan's bronze face was a bronze smile as General Sherman bowed low. "And what, may I ask, was your old name, Mrs. Johnson?" he asked politely.

For the only time in her life, Susan Johnson giggled. "It—it," she answered, "was Trembling Clover."

Meanwhile, General Adams was being blunt and to the point. He gave the chiefs their choice of surrender or death.

The council wrangled for hours, with the die-hards wanting to hold the white women as hostages until General Adams guaranteed a general pardon for the whole band.

Then for the second time in a thousand years, a squaw stormed the sacred session of the chiefs.

Susan Johnson's tongue was a biting lash of scorn:

"Ho, my fine warriors. So, now, it is women you would hold to save your cowardly skins.

"But surrender or no surrender, the white women go free. I speak as a woman, and as your equal.

"My brother, Ouray, has also spoken. He bids you trust the mercy of the Great White Father."

For three hours, she swapped shout for shout, scorn for scorn. For the first time in the experience of the old men, the council heeded a squaw. It voted surrender.

As the Indians broke camp, Johnson kicked the poorest saddle toward Mrs. Meeker.

Susan picked it up and threw it in the brush. Then she handed Mrs. Meeker the finest saddle and the finest blanket.

A minute after, something hit Johnson. It looked like his wife's fist, but it felt like a mule kick.

Susan was standing over him when he came to. "Get up—Chief!" she said mockingly. "You got heap much dirt to shovel on that canal!"

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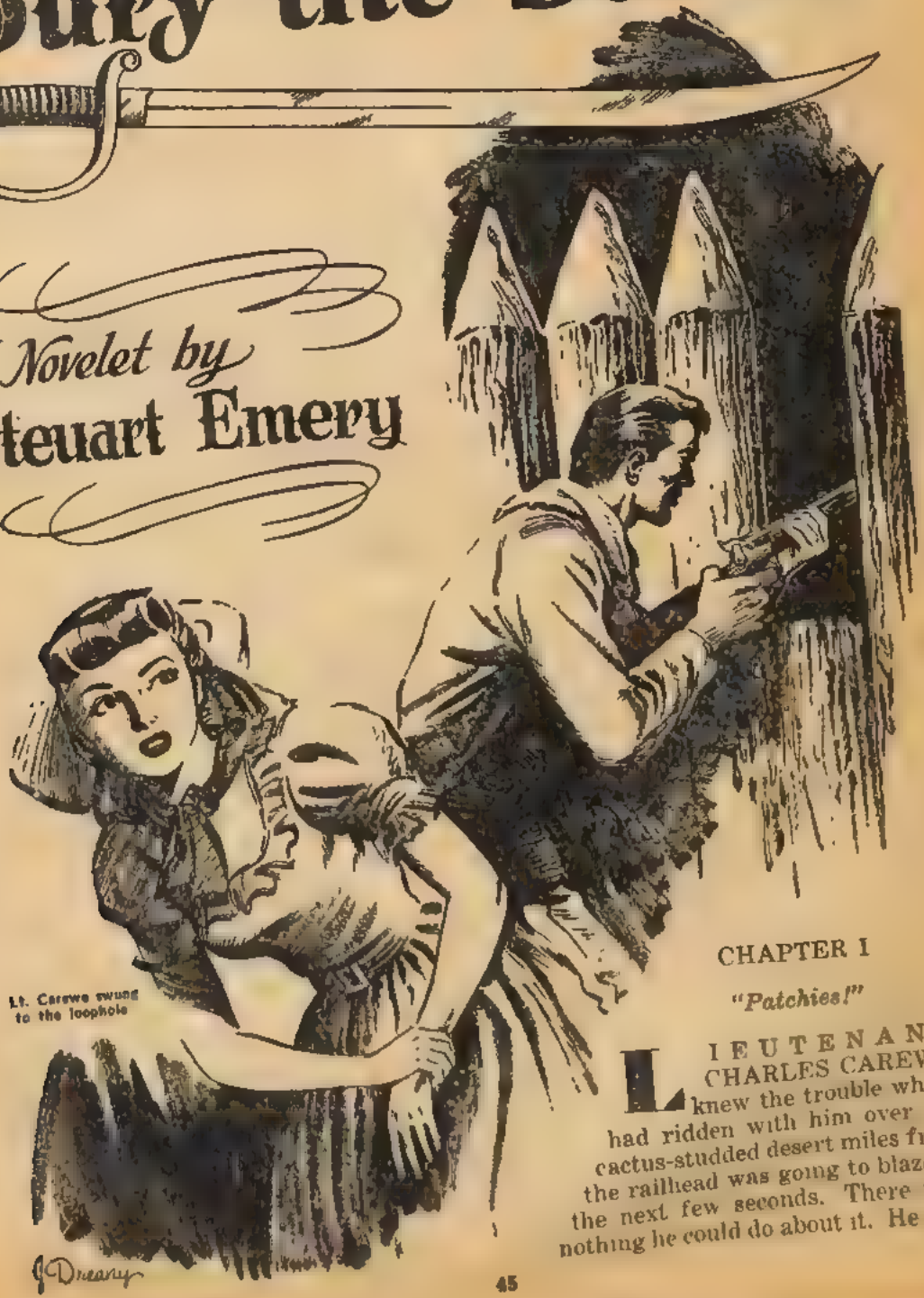
Coming Next Issue: GALLOWS BRIDE OF FRISCO, the true story of Belle Cora, wife of the king of California gamblers—another famed woman of the West—by HAROLD PREECE!

Bury the Saber

A Novelet by
Steuart Emery



CHAPTER I

"Patchies!"

LIEUTENANT CHARLES CAREWE knew the trouble which had ridden with him over the cactus-studded desert miles from the railhead was going to blaze in the next few seconds. There was nothing he could do about it. He was

An Ancient Grudge Makes Lieutenant Carewe

a first lieutenant and the trouble was a colonel. A straight-backed, steel-eyed colonel, hawklike of feature and hawklike in action. The whole frontier Indian-fighting Army knew of Colonel Norris Nickelby, in whose eyes brooded the dark shadows of a past that wasn't even his own.

"Lieutenant!"

The colonel's gauntleted hand gestured out of the window of the creaking stage beside which, at a respectful distance, Carewe urged his alkali-stained mount. Behind the coach rode the detail of troopers he had led to the railhead as escort for the new commander of Fort Jackson.

"Yes, sir." Carewe swung his horse in beside the window, riding a bare yard from it. Colonel Nickelby's gaze fixed him, studying this rangy young officer who sat his mount like a part of it and who would serve under him on a tough job. Red Ghost, the Apache chief, was out and on the raid.

"Your name, please. Lieutenant Bellew, wasn't it? Acting captain of A Company during Captain Dell's absence on six months sick leave? The train whistle was sounding off as you reported."

"Carewe, sir."

Here came the trouble. A Carewe of Virginia meeting a Nickelby of Massachusetts head-on, a generation after the original set-to of their fathers. The historic, tragi-comic incident that had collapsed an army in gray with laughter and filled an army in blue with wild rage.

COLONEL NICKELBY'S gaze became steelier.

"Full name?"

"Lieutenant Charles Carewe, sir. Commissioned from V.M.I." He drew a deep breath. He might just as well get it out and over with. "Charles Carewe, son of the late Major 'Crazy' Carewe, Jeb Stuart's cavalry."

"Aah!"

It was a tight, indrawn breath, instantly suppressed. The lines in Colonel Nickelby's face, hard enough before, seemed to become even harder. His nostrils flared, then whitened, as he held himself in. He was forty-five years old and he had lived with that ancient past under its burden for more than twenty years. Here it came again.

"I see, Lieutenant Carewe. Our fathers have met. Mine was Brigadier General 'Nightshirt' Nickelby."

It was as though the man were deliberately lashing himself, but after all, Carewe knew that 'Nightshirt' Nickelby was Colonel Norris Nickelby's father. So did everyone in the Army.

"Yes, sir."

Under Carewe his mount trotted on, kicking up tiny whorls of border dust. He was swinging easily in the saddle but he seemed somehow to be sitting, not on leather but in a chair—a boy again—on a cool, pillared Virginia veranda. The silver julep cups tinkled and his father, Major 'Crazy' Carewe, and his cronies, fought the war over and over and rode McClellan's rear again. Always came the tale of how Crazy Carewe and forty hard-bitten cavalrymen had captured Brigadier General Daniel Nickelby of Massachusetts in his nightshirt at his headquarters and carried him off into Virginia across the Potomac.

A laughing, reckless twenty-six year old Virginia cavalry major kidnaping a puffy, mid-fiftyish political brigadier with Congressional ambitions, who owned a huge mill and, raising his own volunteer force, got himself appointed to head it by the Governor! Inexperienced militarily, vain and inept, Brigadier Nickelby had been at the front exactly two weeks before Crazy Carewe and his riders scooped him in.

That wasn't all. It got worse from there on. Back across the Potomac Major Crazy Carewe had sent a flag of truce into the Union lines, offering to exchange Brigadier General Nickelby for a pair of Jeb Stuart's lieutenants who had been caught. And the flag of truce Crazy Carewe had sent was Nickelby's monogrammed nightshirt. The exchange had been made. Brigadier Nickelby had been retired to a commissariat base in Massachusetts where, it was commonly

reported, he couldn't run for town alderman. Ten years later he had died of a bloated liver, leaving a bloated fortune.

Carewe looked across three feet of space into the face of the man who had had no use for that fortune. Colonel Norris Nickelby, the son, had lived almost half his life under the shadow of his father's humiliation. He had had a good record as a youthful lieutenant in the war; he had grimly stayed on in the Army, he had gone straight into Indian fighting and he had had twenty years of it. He had married young and lost his wife but had been left with a daughter.

There she sat, beside her colonel father in the stage, swathed in a duster and the veil she hadn't lifted yet. Carewe had seen her so far only as a wrapped figure, avoiding the desert dust. Colonel Nickelby had motioned her direct from train to waiting stage at the railhead. The veil swept up and Carewe saw the clear, oval face it had hidden, in which animation and resolve mingled. Loveliness mixed with character, youth coupled with sureness, blue eyes, red hair. He had never seen anything like this before.

"I'm Rhoda Nickelby, Lieutenant Carewe," said the girl. "Can't we ever bury that old saber? Let's."

"Rhoda!" rasped Colonel Nickelby.

VIOLENTLY Carewe's mount shied as the girl threw up her veil, star-

"Column forward! Into line as skirmishers!"

tled by the strange flapping thing. Carewe fought it down. It came to rest and the stage gained a few yards on it. His own mind was rioting with new thoughts, new impressions that had struck swiftly and deeply. Blood feud in the fort between commanding officer and junior subordinates . . . eyes of deep, loyal blue . . . hair of red . . .

There was more red that struck into his vision and it wasn't a girl's hair. It was more like a piece of Turkey red cloth, flaring suddenly in the belt of chaparral that fringed the side of the road three hundred yards ahead. It was

only luck he had glimpsed it. He swept up the field glasses that hung on his travel-stained tunic breast. Turkey-red cloth—trade goods—Indians!

The levelled lenses cut the distance to nothing. He caught the scowling red-brown face under the red headband in the chaparral, the other flashes of white bands, of moving, swarming Indian bodies.

"Driver, brakes! Patchies!"

The brakes screamed on, the driver was an old hand.

"Column forward! Into line as skirmishers!" Carewe spurred, the troopers spurred to the flank of the halted stage, spread out and stopped. "Ambush ahead! From saddle at that chaparral, volley fire! Prepare to fire! Fire!"

The routine commands for action broke from Carewe mechanically, he had given them before. He was a fighting machine now, bent on cutting down those hidden enemies before they could cut his side down. In scattering bursts the rifle-fire broke out of the chaparral as the troopers swung up their carbines and their own blasts travelled back. Lead lashed the desert air, sand spurted.

"Rake that chaparral!"

The troopers raked it, tore it from side to side and back again. Firing from leather on cavalry mounts trained to combat and standing like statues, they ploughed the cover with aimed gunfire, a tough blow for any enemy to take. And the enemy couldn't take it. The counter-fire from the brush died abruptly. There was an instant's wait and then out of the chaparral, headed south at top gallop, burst the score of Apaches, low on their ponies' necks. They went so fast they were targets for only a few slanting shots before they were out of range, vanishing toward the mountain masses of Mexico in the blue-hazed distance.

"Cease fire!" called Carewe. The troopers relaxed, grins on their sweat-and-dust-caked faces. "Any casualties?"

"Privut Finnegan has got a gotch in his left ear, sor," reported Sergeant Fogarty, big-chested and burly, with the map of County Cork on his face. "That's all."

"He has heard everythin' with that ear anyhow," commented a hook-nosed corporal. "No, Finnie?"

"Shuddup, porkchop," grinned Finnegan.

Carewe pivoted his mount to face the stage, spurred it up and saluted Colonel Nickelby stiffly. The colonel still sat in the window, his cigar ash hardly an eighth of an inch longer than when the firing started.

"Action completed, sir. No casualties for us."

Colonel Nickelby spoke and his voice was icy.

"So I see. Lieutenant Carewe, do you consider it customary for a lieutenant to conduct an action in the presence of his superior officer without notifying him that it is impending and asking for orders? Are you in command of the fort's troops, or am I?"

CHAPTER II

Red Ghost Strikes

HERE was the trouble, actually ablaze. Here was a fighting colonel who stood on rank. And he was right by the book. No junior officer was entitled to take the conduct of an action into his own hands with his regimental commander only yards away.

"Sorry, sir. I was wrong." Carewe's lips clamped, he took the stinging rebuke with discipline. "I should have notified you of the ambush."

"Ho, ho!" observed the stage-driver, throwing off the footbrake. His dusty beard split in a mammoth grin. "Down ter Tucson oncet in a honky-tonk I seed a third assistant deppity blow the divil outer two bad men which was drawin' on Sheriff Boone unsuspected. He did not pause ter notify the sheriff they was ambushin' him, an' request his orders. If he had the sheriff would o' bin in Boot Hill. Nor did Sheriff Boone complain. I reckon they do things diffrunt among us dum civilians."

"That's enough, driver," barked Colonel Nickelby. The tinge of a flush appeared on his lean cheeks that might have meant growing fury. "Lieutenant Carewe, send in a point and search that cover with your main detail after it. Signal the stage to come on if all is clear."

"Right, sir." Carewe snapped another salute, threw out his orders and the detail trotted for the chaparral. Sergeant Fogarty and four men went in ahead, carbines at the ready and disappeared in the brush. Carewe held his other troopers in reserve. Fogarty's voice rose.

"Seven Patchies here which are good littul Patchies." A shot cracked, a second followed instantly. "One devil shammin' dead, which took a crack at me as I passed him. He ain't shammin' dead now, lootenant." There was more rustling in the brush. "All cleaned up on the edge, we're goin' further in."

Carewe dismounted and motioned his men into the cover. Sprawled amid the brush lay the Indians. The volley fire had hit harder than he had hoped for, it had wiped out close to a quarter of the raiders.

He moved here and there looking for the Apache with the red headband and found him. Close to the edge of the road he lay, on his face, and his back had two dripping holes in it.

Carewe bent down and turned him over. He was staring at cruel, intelligent features, hardly gone lax yet in destruction. The left arm was a misfit, it was withered and crooked into uselessness.

"Ah!" said Carewe in a low voice.

"All clear, yooooo!" came Fogarty's yell. "Brush all scouted, all clear, yoooo!"

"Signal up the stage, trooper," Carewe ordered the nearest man.

The sound of creaking axles began to rise. The shape of the stage bulked up beside the brush and stopped. Colonel Nickelby got out and stepped into the chaparral.

"Seven, sir," said Carewe. "Six and —" He paused. "Crooked Arm, Red Ghost's brother."

"Crooked Arm, you got Crooked Arm?" said Nickelby swiftly. He looked down at the casualty with the red band. "There's no doubt of that."

"Yes, sir, he is—"

"Lieutenant Carewe, you do not have to vouchsafe information until I ask for it. I have the complete record of Crooked Arm, beside that of Red Ghost, and their entire career of ten years depredation on this border. In fact, I have been specially sent to wipe out this menace once and for all. A free hand with all the troops I care to call for."

"Yes, sir." A slow rage began to burn in Carewe.

EVERYTHING he did, everything he said, to this stiff-backed colonel was going to be wrong because of the ancient grudge. Colonel Nickelby could make or break him with a single written report.

"You've done Indian fighting, Lieutenant Carewe?"

"Three years, sir."

"You're familiar with fighting them, yes. But do you know anything about their tribal customs, beliefs, loyalties? Can you project your mind into an Apache's mind and figure what he will do?"

"I've studied them, I've tried, sir."

"Then what will Red Ghost do when his beaten warriors take him back the news in Mexico that Crooked Arm has been killed by United States Cavalry?"

"He will raid and scalp and burn like a madman. He will go hellbent for revenge for his brother's death. The blood tie is everything to an Indian. He will try to rouse the reservations. Scores, maybe hundreds, of white settlers will pay for Crooked Arm. And if he is ever able to get a soldier in his hands . . ."

Carewe shrugged. Twice he and his troopers had gone white-hot and quivering with fury as they sat saddle and looked down on what they had found staked out on the sands. The hacked and scalped and burned bodies with the remnants of blue cloth and army boots on them.

"You know, sir."

"Quite well. So I intend to waste no time getting along to Fort Jackson. Mount your men and meet me at the stage."

When Carewe jockeyed his mount to the stage side Colonel Nickelby was writing on a despatch pad. Rhoda leaned forward, eyes alight and sparkling. The Army frontier girl was jubilant in victory as any of the men who had fought it.

"Well done, Lieutenant Carewe, well—"

"Rhoda, be quiet. We are not through

yet." She sank back against the aged leather. Nickelby thrust out the sheet of despatch paper.

"Open desert from now to the Fort, I understand. No chance of further ambush. I figure that Crooked Arm and his band were making for the Border, returning from some raid, when they spotted the stage and took their opportunity for ambush. You can split your force, Lieutenant Carewe. Ride ahead with half of it, let the rest follow the stage. When we get to Jackson take this directly to the telegraph sergeant for despatch. You need not render any report of your own for the files, I shall take care of it myself as CO. After the wire is sent go about your company duties. That is all."

"Yes, sir."

Carewe wheeled off. The stage began to roll. He rode well in advance of it, looking at limitless dreary sand and scraggly sage and spiny cactus, instead of at its side window looking at a slim figure with red hair and blue eyes that he felt somehow would be exchanging silent messages with his. It had been as quick as that, the attraction between them. And Carewe, a forthright man, was not one to deny it or refuse to admit it. Nor was the girl any less honest. There was something more than curiosity, more than interest in the way her blue eyes followed him.

He glanced down at a different kind of message. It was easy to read.

Major General Norton
Commanding Southwest Department

Cavalry detail under my command killed Crooked Arm, in brief action today. Full written report later.

Nickelby,
Col. Commanding
Fort Jackson

No mention of Lieutenant Carewe who had fought the action which had disposed of Crooked Arm. There never would be any. By the rank and the book the CO had the credit for everything that took place under his command. And this was the rank and the book, violently and bitterly used.

It was an easy message to read but it was hard to take.

"WAGON comin' from the west, gate guard! Yoooo!"

Carewe raised his head from the mass of paperwork that covered the table in his headquarters prison. From where he sat he could look straight down the hard-baked parade ground to the big gate midway of the stockade that faced southward. For three days now he had been seeing that same view whenever he lifted his head from the forms of triplicate that were now his job. Detached by Colonel Nickelby's order from command of his combat company, he was set to pen-pushing as assistant to Captain Bard, the adjutant. Deeper and deeper the spurs of the son of 'Nightshirt' Nickelby were rowelling him. Somewhere there would come the breaking point.

"Come ahead, wagon!" shouted the gate sentry.

Carewe could see the wagon now, swinging for the gate. It came in a mad flurry of dust, its driver still lashing his team.

"What's yore hurry, nester?"

Through the gate hurtled the spring wagon. On its driver's seat was a middle-aged man with his bonneted wife beside him, holding a baby in her lap. Beside the wagon galloped a fourteen-year old boy in hickory shirt and jeans, bare-backed on a plough horse and leading another. These were farming folk, homesteaders, and they had left their homestead in a hurry.

"Red Ghost has struck Sun Valley! He has wiped out th' hull valley!"

"Good gaw!"

The murmur traveled the post enclosure. Carewe sprang to his feet and through the front door of headquarters onto its porch.

"Nester, this way!" he shouted, holding up his hand. He called back over his shoulder to the trooper on the bench inside. "Orderly, tell Colonel Nickelby Sun Valley has been struck."

The nester caught Carewe's signal and slammed the wagon for headquarters, pulling up before it. His homely features worked. He needed calming.

"All right, nester," said Carewe

quietly. "You're in an Army Post. Now just tell me—"

"I'll take this over, Lieutenant Carewe." The biting voice of Colonel Nickelby, called from his inner office, sounded. He stood at Carewe's side. "Go ahead, my man."

The nester gulped. "Cale Baker, I am. Outer Ioway originally. Two year my wife Ellen and I bin on our homestead, five miles south o' th' lower end o' Sun Valley. Outer Sun Valley comes a nester on a horse, jest got out by the skin o' his teeth. Red Ghost had swept it clear ter his site an' was comin' on, burnin' an' murderin'. We took up an' got out. I spread the alarm ter twelve more settlers on the way here, they air comin' fast behind me. But Red Ghost he has got his scouts fanned out ahead o' him, they may all git cotched."

"Not if we can stop it!" Colonel Nickelby's jaw went tight, his voice rose in a rasp that carried clear across the parade ground. "Tower, Southwest. Swing your glass due west. Report instantly."

Carewe knew what was up in Tower Southwest, a huge mounted telescope. The cry travelled back.

"Dust coming about eight miles!" There was a pause. "Dots behind it!" Another pause. "Patchie dots!"

"T r u m p e t e r!" The headquarters trumpeter sprang to attention. "Boots and Saddles." The old alarm of the frontier blasted across the post. Again Colonel Nickelby's voice rose in its carrying rasp. "A Company! Due west. Eight miles. Apaches pursuing settlers in wagons."

Carewe saw something he had never seen before in all his army service. Directly across from headquarters building under the stockade wall, bulked the stables with the troopers' barracks close by. Instead of troopers racing from their barracks and wherever they happened to be, flinging saddles and kit on their stabled mounts and leading them out in a line, he saw the line of horses and men come straight out of the stalls and the troopers swing to saddle. Lieutenant Haynes in front of them. Every horse of A Company had been kept under saddle and bridle, every trooper had been sitting beside it all day, at Nickelby's order, poised to strike in emergency.

"Lieutenant Haynes, take them out. Ride!"

A lump rose in Carewe's throat and his fists tightened under his nails bit his palms. He heard Haynes' quick competent orders.

"By the right flank, yo! Trot . . . canter . . . gallop!"

The column went from walk to trot, to easy canter and into full velocity of a tearing gallop in hardly more than seconds. There went A Company, Carewe's own company of which he was acting captain, out into combat and they went without him.

Haynes was a good officer, able and congenial. They bunked together in Bachelor's Hall, but it was Carewe's company to lead. He knew every trooper in it, but he knew his own platoon best. He had ridden and thirsted and sweated and fought with them from the veteran Fogarty through Abrams the swarthy, hook-nosed corporal, to Private Finnegan, going out with a bandaged ear.

There they went out of the gate and in minutes they would be rowelling into action, while he stayed behind. He looked down at what he had in his hand and the thin stem of the penholder snapped. He threw its pieces aside.

"Destroying government property, Lieutenant Carewe?" said Colonel Nickelby. "Step inside, please, Baker. My adjutant will ask you some questions for me. I'll be in Tower Southwest, Carewe."

CHAPTER III

Love and War

THE nester got down as Nickelby strode for the watch tower. His wife alighted also, holding the blanketed baby. From it came croaking, strangling sounds.

"What is it, Mrs. Baker?" Rhoda Nickelby had come from the colonel's quarters close by without Carewe seeing her. "The baby is ill?"

"Croup, miss. Bad."

"There are plenty of croup kettles on any post, also a Surgeon-Major. Army brats come down with it regularly. Don't worry, Mrs. Baker, I've had nurse training. Corporal Williams!" The non-com stepped out of the gathering crowd. "See that the horses and rig are put up. Tell the billeting sergeant-major to find a billet for the Bakers."

"Yes, Miss Nickelby." The non-com saluted. This colonel's daughter worked at being a colonel's daughter. "Our quarters are just down the Officer's Row, Mrs. Baker. Come with me, please."

Rhoda's gaze, rising, met and locked with Carewe's. He was off the porch striding instinctively toward her.

"Anything I can do?"

"No—that is . . ." She stopped. He felt they didn't need many words.

"Any chance of seeing you?" He spoke low, his voice drowned in the stir about them.

"It's hard to see how."

He knew. No junior officer ever called on the daughter of a colonel without that colonel's sanction. He was never going to get sanction from the son of Nightshirt Nickelby who was riding him into the dust. Between Rhoda and himself was the wall of Army regulations and an unburied saber.

"I'd like to talk to you."

"I'd like to talk to you, too. I asked father to invite you with the other young officers the other night, he put you on duty instead. So—"

"Lissen!" said a trooper. Silence fell on the crowd about them. Faint and far off came a sound like popping corn. It was A Company hitting the Patchies out there miles away on the desert.

"That's your company, I know," Rhoda said under cover of the stir that rose again. "He's keeping you behind. I mean to talk to him about it at the right time. But I don't think—"

"I guess we don't meet again," Carewe said quietly. The girl's eyes flashed.

"We will. I'll find a way. Leave it to me."

Hope rose suddenly in Carewe's eyes. "I was praying you'd feel that way."

"I do. Am I brazen?"

"No! Thank heaven you're honest. There's so little time—so little opportunity, this way. There's so much to tell you. . . ."

"I know." A slow flush tinted her golden tan. "I want to hear it." Her direct gaze faltered. "Does that tell you what you want to know?"

It did. He could tell by the sudden muffled thunder of his heart, if by no other sign. The instant spark which had leaped between them had grown into a flame which each of them was nourishing in secret, even as it had to be hidden from the world.

From nowhere she had come to be suddenly the most important thing in the world to him. And she was saying, in cryptic, but unmistakable phrases, that he was as important to her. And the warmth of her eyes gave emphasis to it. Excitement shook him.

"Let me know, somehow," he urged. "Get me word when I can see you."

Out on the desert the gunfire stopped.

"I will. I—" she made a quick gesture. "From the Tower. Coming."

The tall figure of Colonel Nickelby was striding over the packed sand, returning to headquarters. He was still at a distance but he had eyes. He could see the two of them together.

"Mrs. Baker, ready? We'll go. Bring your son."

"Licked 'em! They run!" rose the jubilant cry from Tower Southwest.

Carewe stepped back into headquarters and settled himself at the paper-work covered desk. He took up a new pen and dipped it into the ink. He felt stiff, taut, all over. His stomach drew tight as it always did before combat. In one minute Colonel Nickelby would be through the door and he knew what to expect.

Someone else came through the door first, however, Signal Sergeant Harlow, gaunt and competent, from the telegraph shack next to the headquarters building. Carewe recalled dully that the key had been clicking.

"Well, Signal Sergeant?"

"Noos for the colonel, Lootenant. Plenty."

Harlow retreated and Carewe took in the brief message in a flash. He rose to his feet, walking out from behind the desk and faced Colonel Nickelby as he entered.

"Lieutenant Carewe! I have just seen you—"

"Sir! This came in. It is vital."

Colonel Nickelby stared into Carewe's face and saw the expression there. He took the message. Every word of it, Carewe felt, was burned into his own brain.

COMMANDING OFFICER
FORT JACKSON
TWO HUNDRED YOUNG BRAVES JUST JUMPED RESERVATION ON WAY TO BORDER TO JOIN RED GHOST. ENTIRE RESERVATION RISING.

ANDREW MACINTOSH
INDIAN AGENT

"Now," said Colonel Nickelby, "We've got a war."

CAREWE put his hand to his head. It ached intolerably. His eyes were dull, the heat in the lamplit headquarters room was a stifling blanket. Eleven o'clock and with this last triplicate form he would be through.

From the colonel's office in the rear he caught the voices that went on and on, Colonel Nickelby and Adjutant Bard still going over their plans. This was war, as Nickelby had said, and he was a fighting commander who would strike as fast as he could.

The pen made its final mark and Carewe rose. Back to quarters, back to bed, when the bugle blasted Reveille he would wake to another day of ink and paper. His brain was numb, his body sagged. He'd catch a bit of the desert breeze that the log enclosure cut off on the firing platform and try to clear his head of its physical aching. He couldn't clear it of the mental ache it carried.

On the porch he looked at Officers Row. There was a splotch of white on the verandah of Colonel Nickelby's quarters. Rhoda, also trying for coolness before she slept. And he couldn't cross the parade ground and see her.

He pulled himself together, threw his shoulders back and walked fast for the southern wall. The post slept, the deep sleep of overworked men, waiting for the call back to combat.

Carewe reached the wall and went up the steps to the firing platform, sweeping off his campaign hat. There was a breeze up here, drifting in over the stockade, where every tenth log had been cut down at its top to make a firing loophole.

"Halt! Who goes there?" The challenge came fast. "Advance, lootenant, ye are reckernized."

He hadn't seen Sergeant Fogarty beside the wall, carbine at the ready.

"Fogarty," said Carewe. "What are you doing here?"

"Sargint o' the guard, lootenant. Privit Burke he got the cramps from a secind helpin' o' beans at guard mess an' he yowled fer relief. I was makin' me rounds ennyhow so I took over. Now them beans we are gittin' from that shabby cook—but thin the lootenant ain't inspectin' A Company's beans no more."

"No," said Carewe grimly, "I'm not. And I don't know when I'll be back inspecting A Company's beans."

Sergeant Fogarty lifted his eyes eloquently and fixed them on the heavens where the stars hung low and incredibly brilliant in the moonlit desert arch.

"Star o' the Evenin', Beautiful Star," he observed. "There is somebody in this man's army is gittin' hell's own raw deal."

"That'll do, sergeant," said Carewe. But he went warm all over. A Company missed him, they wanted him back.

"Yis, sor. But if the—Halt, who goes?" Up swept the carbine and Fogarty stared behind Carewe. "Advance, Miss Rhoda."

CHAPTER IV
Suicide Mission

SHE was coming, she was coming along the firing platform in a white hooded cloak. He hadn't looked behind him across the parade ground, he hadn't heard her light footsteps on the platform steps.

"You!"

"Yes. I told you, didn't I?" Her smile was warm and deep.

A frightful groan sounded. "Lootenant, Lootenant Carewe!" Fogarty was clutching his midriff. "Oh, oh, oh, I am took! ! Them beans! Lootenant—could—would the lootenant relieve me till I git the cure-all I got in quarters? In an emergency, lootenant, the regulations."

"Fogarty," said Carewe, "you are the most intelligent sergeant I have ever had. The carbine."

The weapon was extended and Carewe turned to the loophole. Under the moon it was the most beautiful desert he had ever seen. His pulses leaped and thumped. Clear sand, with cactus and bunches of sage that ran into glorious space. He heard Fogarty's boots clump off the steps and out onto the parade ground. The carbine went against the wall.

"Rhoda!"

"I said I'd make the chance. I waited on our veranda until I saw you leave headquarters and followed. Father's never going to give in, he's never going to let us see each other."

"I know he isn't."

"That old, unburied saber. Oh, why can't that war between the states be forgotten? We're all one country now, we've been one country for years. Poor Grandfather Nickelby, he was just a kind, vain, peaceful man who should never have gone to the front. He should have been a brigadier of volunteers making speeches and raising funds at home. Father's one idea, one drive in life, is to be a fighting general who'll wipe out that silly old story. And then he and you meet."

"And you and I meet."

"Yes."

"And I feel somehow we had to meet. This is only the third time I've talked to you and already we've thrown the preliminaries away."

"There are no preliminaries in war, Charles. This is war. I've known girls on army posts who wanted all the preliminaries and they got them. Also the Indians got their men before they did. Charles!"

"Yes, Rhoda."

"You want me? I want you."

It was as simple as that. Life out here was as simple as that. Arrows and gunfire and death waiting tomorrow, perhaps under the desert stars but love under the desert stars tonight, to be taken because the chance for it might never come again. She was in his arms, the hood of her cloak fallen back showing her lustrous hair, her eyes closed, her lips warm on his, her white arms about his shoulders. Colonel Norris Nickelby, the son of Nightshirt Nickelby, could break him, could throw him out of the service but he had Rhoda.

"Rhoda!"

"Yes, Charles dear? Oh!"

The cry broke from her and the crack of the rifle shot seemed to follow rather than precede it. Her arms fell away from his neck, he swept the carbine up from its rest against the wall. Destruction had smashed from the sands.

"Rhoda, you hit?"

She had her left arm up. Blood was running along her forearm.

"Creased."

He swung to the loophole, his body hot with rage. Never had he sighted faster, thought quicker, every sense brought into climax. Only one place that shot could have come from, the cactus clump out there two hundred yards due south. He poured his carbine fire into it.

Two figures jumped into view, one racing across the sands, the other hit and hit hard, spinning like a child's top on its moccasined feet and as it spun Carewe gave it the coup-de-grace between the shoulders. He drew a deep breath, steadied the carbine on the firing rest, and at three hundred yards made the best shot of his life. He hit where he meant to and broke the Indian's back.

"Patchies! Patchies!" The yell came from the corner tower and a carbine began to go off, fired completely at random.

Lt. Carewe turned from his loophole. The swift enemy strike was over. He himself was shaking at the thought of that near miss.

"Rhoda, darling!" He caught her in his arms. "It was my fault. I never dreamed Red Ghost would sneak his men so close."

"Not your fault, mine. I followed you here."

"And someone else is following," said Carewe. He let her go.

Already Colonel Nickelby had covered half the distance from nearby headquarters. He was traveling fast. Sergeant Fogarty was coming too, he had barely reached the platform before Colonel Nickelby was at its lower steps. Nickelby picked up the distance—he was only two yards behind Fogarty as the sergeant reached Rhoda and Carewe.

"Well, Lieutenant Carewe?" Nickelby's tone was harsh. "What happened?"

"Sergeant Fogarty relieving Private Burke taken ill on guard, taken ill himself, I took the relief. Two of Red Ghost's braves in a cactus clump out yonder fired on the Fort. Young braves I would say, sir, from that Sun Valley raiding party, trying to count coup for themselves and getting on top of the fort before the moon rose. I got them both, sir."

"And you, Rhoda, what are you doing here?"

The girl threw her head back defiantly.

"The fort is free for me to walk around in. I saw Lieutenant Carewe and came up here. And—"

"You were hit." The colonel pointed to the stain on Rhoda's cloak sleeve, that concealed her arm. She flung back the sleeve.

"Only a crease. It stings that's all."

Nickelby's eyes swept the platform, missing nothing. "The bullet came through that loophole. Carewe, as sentry, you should have been standing at that loophole, not my daughter. Her arm to have been creased below the elbow must have been held at the height of a man's shoulder. Rhoda, go to your quarters, I'll send Sergeant-Major Lowell. Carewe!"

"Sir."

"That bullet could have easily gone through my daughter's head. If she had been six inches further forward it would have."

"Yes, sir."

It was coming now, court martial for dereliction of duty while acting as sentry. He had nothing to say. He was guilty as sin, he should have been looking out onto the sands, not deep into shining eyes.

"Officer of the Day, send out and bring those Apache bodies in for possible identification." Below the firing platform officers and men had gathered, the entire guard had tumbled out. "Carewe, come with me."

In utter silence Nickelby led the way to headquarters and went through its main room to his private office. He sat down behind the plain pine table that served as desk, motioning to Carewe to sit opposite him. His face was as hard as granite and as expressionless.

"Lieutenant Carewe," he said, "I am sending you out of this fort tomorrow."

Carewe nodded in silence. This was it—dismissal from active service, disgrace.

"With the first platoon of A Company."

"Sir!" exclaimed Carewe incredulously.

"Look at this map." Nickelby spread the big squared sheet on the table and put his forefinger down on a spot. "Bald Rock is half a mile from the Border and Red Ghost is based just below the border, my Indian scouts tell me. With your platoon you will form a helio signal station, linked to Fort Jackson by a relay helio squad on the desert scarp here, five miles from Bald Rock. High-powered glasses will give you a view thirty miles east and west of Bald Rock. If Red Ghost crosses by day, his dust will betray him. If by night, his dust will show as he comes back. Do you know Bald Rock, by any chance?"

"I've passed it on patrol."

Into Carewe's mind drifted the recollection of the frowning peak, sheer cliff on its south side, that was surrounded by malpais, chaparral and cactus for a full mile. It towered above the desert, the perfect watchtower. Also the perfect death trap for any small force caught on it.

"You'll reach Bald Rock by sunset tomorrow and helio you're there. You'll hold that position indefinitely. You will . . ."

Colonel Nickelby's eyes fixed Carewe. They were merciless. Carewe didn't care much about the further orders. He knew why he was going to Bald Rock with sixteen men, when Red Ghost had a couple of hundred on the other side of

the Border and more hundreds were rising from the reservation. The ancient score would be settled any day now and it was all quite military, quite regular, quite by the book.

Colonel Nickelby was sending him out to be killed.

Subconsciously he realized that the telegraph next door was rattling away again and his mind registered the fragments of the message.

". . . use your own judgment in campaign . . . you are in the field . . . your recommendation for promotion to brigadier general for disposing of Crooked Arm going through in Washington . . . Signed, Norton, Commanding Southwest."

Not Colonel—it was Brigadier General Nickelby, whose promotion he had gained for him, sending him out to be killed.

CHAPTER V
Mantrap

CAREWE poured water onto his handkerchief from his canteen and bathed his sticky eyes. The pale light that precedes the dawn was in the east, very soon the dawn itself would come rushing over the peak and the desert. Sergeant Fogarty stood beside him and a pair of sentries peered down into the blackness of the cover below. Only a moment before Fogarty's shake on his shoulder had waked Carewe.

"The lootenant coulda got in a few more winks," said Fogarty. "But the lootenant said ter git him up half an hour before dawn."

"I meant it. What they call the wolf's hour, it's also the Indians' hour. Anything to report from the sentries?"

"A couple of 'em heard some kinda motion way out in the brush, prob'bly animals. A lotta gravel run down the rock which could happen of itself. Nuthin' was sighted."

"Indians don't like to attack at night. We'll be okay at night but in the daytime—Those boulders. Fogarty, they're cover clear up to within sixty yards of where we stand."

Carewe looked downward in the growing light, knowing what was there. Boulders, some as big as army wagons, cluttered the rising slope to where it ended in a slanting rock glacis that ran clear to the summit. At the foot of the peak spread the mile of chaparral and brush.

"Star o' the Evenin', Beautiful Star," remarked Fogarty. "A hull platoon an' somebuddy whom somebuddy else don't like, jay-bird naked on a rock which is jist about in enemy territory. Twinty miles ter the nearest rescue force at the fort. The United States Cavalry is not composed of angels, they kin not fly thim twinty mile in twinty minutes. Taps."

"Fogarty, that will do." Carewe motioned toward the helio on its stand, rising from the rock a few yards away. "As soon as the sun comes up get on that blinker and signal 'Nothing to report' to the relay at the scarp. Ask if they have any orders from the fort for us."

"Yis, sor. Messige as follers: 'Nuthin' ter report overnite. Has Old Niteshirt's son got ennythin' fer us?' "

"Fogarty!"

Whoooosh! Crash! The arrow went past Carewe's head in an invisible streak and missed. The bullet whipped and did not miss. It struck full on the glass of the helio and shattered it. Fogarty's carbine came up and he snapshot into the semi-murk below.

"Patchies, two of 'em on that big boulder!"

Carewe snatched out his whistle and blew. His men came out from under blankets, grabbed the carbines that lay beside them and ran for the rim of the rock, torn from their dreams and thrust into violent reality. The light was strengthening, dawn was striking.

"There they are, men!" called Carewe. "Leapfrogging from boulder to boulder! Plenty of them, coming up!"

There were plenty of them. There were entirely too many of them. Singly and in twos, then in groups, then by the dozens that mounted into the scores, Carewe saw the lithe redbrown figures swarming up the lower slopes. They weaved, they dodged, they filtered from rock to crevice and in behind every bit of cover the ground provided. They began to fire and a storm of bullets swept

over the rim of Bald Rock. This was no raiding party of Red Ghost's, it was Red Ghost's main force. When he struck with it full, no sixteen men could stand against it.

"Keep down, men. Trim them off, no misses."

Fogarty fired and a shirted figure went off the top of a boulder. The platoon began to rattle off their shots. They were hard, stark men, not a recruit among them. Their faces were savage, their eyes were bitter over their carbine sights. They would fight to the last man and they would make Red Ghost pay a big price. But, thought Carewe, grimly, Red Ghost would be willing to pay it in return for Crooked Arm.

Carewe crouched down and tapped Fogarty's shoulder. "Enough of that blinker glass left to get a message to the fort on?"

"Nary a chance, lootenant. It split in the middle an' both halves fell on the rock an' busted."

Strained faces turned to Carewe. The shooting had lulled, his words had carried along the firing line.

"It's all right, men," he said with false cheer. "The blinker's out but the relay on the scarp can hear the firing. They'll be calling Jackson this minute."

AGAIN the shooting swelled and under cover of it Fogarty slipped words out of the corner of his mouth.

"Wet yer finger, lootenant, an' hold it up. The wind's dead again' us, the relay station's can't hear no firin'. Oh, ye would ye, ye red divil!" His shot drilled an Apache seventy yards away, caught in mid-jump between boulders.

Carewe surveyed his line. "Corporal Schmidt, can you hold the right flank?"

Schmidt scowled and his huge Saxon moustache worked up. "Ja, loodenant, long time till der bulleds give out."

"Corporal Abrams, the left flank?"

"Sure, can do. There is a big crevice runs up to here. It is full of Patchies, but they can not git out with me and Finnie on them."

"Make your fight, Abrams, Schmidt. Make it all of you, men."

So they made it and as the eternity of bullets and arrow fire, whoops and oaths, wore on under the blazing desert sun that dried a man's very bones and paralyzed his throat, Carewe knew that it was hopeless and sensed that his men knew it, too.

Always closer crept the enemy and now a mass of them were hidden behind the boulders at the foot of the glacis. Once when he lifted his gaze longingly into the distance where Fort Jackson lay he caught the helio winking from the scarp.

"*Where is your morning report?*" it asked and he stifled a desperate curse.

"I seed it, too," husked Fogarty, beside him. "No, we ain't got no mornin' report fer Fort Jackson an' the evenin' report is gonna be a stinko. They ain't heared a gunshot from us. Ye knew they couldn't, lootenant."

"Yes, get ready."

Far down the slope a flash of yellow showed above a boulder. It was what Carewe feared most to see and now here it was. Red Ghost wore a yellow headband. It was Red Ghost, the master of warfare, leading his braves in person.

Beyond the lower slope there was still more movement in the chaparral, that would be more Apaches held in reserve and now coming up to give the covering fire while the Patchies at the base of the glacis struck and over-ran the peak.

"Red Ghost there, Fogarty! Men!" He heard a yell from the boulder behind which Red Ghost crouched. "Here they come! Hit them!"

From behind boulder and out of crevice stormed the attack, screeching, waving steel, firing lead and shafts. Sixty, seventy—eighty—a hundred and more crazed Apaches charging sixteen men.

"Keep on hitting! Volley!"

The sixteen carbines smashed like one and the first wave of Patchies went down. The high-powered arms were driving their bullets through two and three men at a time, charging in mass. The attack reeled, broke, reformed and came on again. Carewe's right hand jumped and jumped again, his own shots ploughed the swarm. Somewhere in a mad world Abrams was shouting, Schmidt was shouting, other men were shouting, he was shouting himself. He stared at red-brown faces, insane with hatred, he stared into gun muzzles and

realized that the air sang with metal. They were up, they were within thirty yards of the rim, the charge would carry.

"Holy saints, I am crazy! I have gone off me head!" howled Fogarty. "Lootenant, Lootenant, the guidon! Two guidons —three guidons! Now I know I am loco! The brush, the brush!"

Carewe's glance lanced over the charge and he knew that he too had gone out of his mind. Fluttering, the three red and white guidons burst from the edge of the cover that ran to Bald Rock's base, on them lined the blue-clad men.

Three troops, three troops of dismounted cavalry were running up the slope, carbines and revolvers out. The brass of a trumpet tore apart the noise of battle.

"Charge!"

Yes, he had gone mad, mad, mad!

"Carewe, hold the peak! We are coming!" Out in the first line of the charging troopers strode Colonel Nickelby, gun in hand. "Hold on, Carewe! Drive them, men! Drive them on Carewe!"

"The fort, the fort has got here! Holy Sainted miracles!" yowled Fogarty.

THE whole base of the peak seemed to vanish in billows of black powder smoke. Stricken in their rear, the perfect target on the exposed glacis, the Apache charge that had all but carried the crest disintegrated like grains of red sand. Nickelby drove them onto Carewe, Carewe stopped them cold and drove them back onto Nickelby. There was no place for them to go, no way to meet the double storm of carbines and Colts.

Yelling, the troopers raced up the slope, now was littered with Indian bodies, and it was all over. What was left of the Apache attack was in flight down the sides of the peak or else stood around snarling with hands up.

Carewe looked over his line of men. Four wounded but not knocked out. Abrams and Finnegan lying limp out on the left flank. He walked over and stared down at them, exhausted and drained in after-battle letdown. Abrams' forehead was a ruin, Finnegan's throat pierced by an arrow.

"Good men both," said Fogarty. "An' the best o' friends. Yis, they held the flank, like Porkchop said they would. Look yonder, lootenant."

Carewe looked into the deep crevice that ran to within ten yards of the peak's top. It was piled deep with Indian bodies, some still stirring.

"They were better than just good men," he said. "There are at least thirty Patchies in there. Two men, holding off fifteen times their number and more."

There was still shooting going on down the slope where the troopers were routing out the last of the enemy as they fled among the boulders and gullies.

"Take over the platoon, Fogarty," said Carewe, "I'm reporting."

He started down the slope for Colonel Nickelby. He saw him standing beside a huge, flat-topped rock, lost sight of him as more big boulders got in his way, rounded a turn and came on him. Nickelby had his Colt cylinder thrown open and was ejecting its shells, preparing to reload. Carewe's own revolver had long since clicked emptily.

"Good work, Carewe," said Nickelby.

"Colonel, look up!" burst from Carewe.

The yellow headband had thrust over the edge of the flat-topped boulder, the malevolent reddish face under it twisted in hate. Red Ghost was up there, concealed until now, and his gun held straight on Nickelby's head, scant feet below him.

Here came Nickelby's end! The thought tore through Carewe's mind. Here came the end to the barrier between himself and Rhoda that the living man represented. All he had to do was to stand with his own gun empty and watch Red Ghost fire and flee.

His useless gun came up, levelled at the Apache.

"Red Ghost!" he shouted. "Red Ghost, you buzzard!"

Red Ghost's slitted eyes veered to Carewe and he made the choice Carewe had sensed he would make. His gun hand swerved and he shot for the man who had the drop on him, not at the man still loading.

Lead whipped past Carewe's neck. The second shot crashed and he felt the shock of the bullet in his left shoulder. The third shot cracked and Red Ghost

slumped, gun falling from his nerveless hand. A wisp of smoke drifted from Nickelby's revolver muzzle.

"Thanks, Carewe. You drew him, I got one shell into the chamber. Surgeon Major Lowell, this way."

The burnsided officer with the medical kit slashed the cloth away and looked.

"You'll be all right, Carewe. I'll have that bullet out with anesthetic in a quarter of an hour at the fort. The ambulances are coming. Any casualties on the peak?"

"Four walking wounded, two dead."

SURGEON Major Lowell was off, his quick bandaging job done. Carewe's shoulder hurt dully, his mind hurt worse. Back in the same old trouble.

"Carewe, I owe you an explanation," Colonel Nickelby was saying. " A colonel doesn't exactly confide his high-level plans to the junior officers if he doesn't see fit. Carewe, I used you and your platoon to pull Red Ghost into an ambush. It was too good a chance for him to knock over and kill or capture and torture a small outpost. I knew you'd be spotted on the peak with no cover, and Red Ghost lurking just across from you. I guessed Red Ghost would strike this dawn, I managed to read his mind. So we caught him between two forces and ground him to pieces. This Indian war's over. The braves who jumped the Agency will jump right back again.

"I followed your trail with three troops last night, dismounted them behind the helio relay scarp and single-filed them five miles across the desert in the dark of the moon into the cover of the brush. We've been lying doggo there all night, half a mile away.

"Yes, Carewe, I used you, I drove you to desperation, I tempered the steel in you. I made you into the finest young fighting officer I have ever seen under my command. I had to have desperate men led by a desperate officer on this peak, holding to the last cartridge so Red Ghost would lock his whole force into battle and forget his rear. I've ridden you with spurs, Carewe, since the moment we met, I've deviled you almost beyond endurance and, by George, you took it! Carewe! I did it for the service we both belong to, to put this over."

"Sir?"

Nickelby's hand was out. He took it. The clasp was firm and sure, it was the hand of the finest fighting colonel Carewe had ever had.

"I'm only human. But the old rancor is gone now, the old saber is buried."

"Yes, sir."

"We brought our own helio man, I know yours is gone or you would have used it. He has his orders, there goes his message." On the peak top the blinker was coding.

. . . *"Action over . . . victory . . . start horse-holders and ambulances."*

"Soldier!" A grimy, grinning trooper came quickly. "Take this message to the top. 'Carewe okay. Start Rhoda'."

"I—I don't think I—" said Carewe.

"Rhoda's had nurse training. She's there on horseback behind the scarp with the medicals and the ambulances waiting for the wind-up of the action. Captain Carewe, when you get to be a Colonel you, no doubt, will control your regiment superbly but never try to control a daughter who is in love. Particularly if she is red-headed."

"Captain Carewe?"

"A Company is yours from now on. Two days ago by the mail despatch courier I sent your name in to Major General Norton for promotion, credited with the Crooked Arm action. I'm brigadier now, there'll be no turndown on you. So . . ." Colonel Nickelby lifted the glasses that hung on his chest and stared north through them. He smiled and passed them over.

"Rhoda—on the fastest horse in Fort Jackson."

The single plume of dust was travelling like an arrow across the desert, and into the lenses of the high-powered glasses that Carewe gripped. It was also travelling straight into Captain Charles Carewe's heart.

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Coming Next Issue SAGEBRUSH SAMARITAN, by LEE BOND, plus many other fascinating stories and features!

Branding Fire Song Book

By TEX BROWN

HOWDY, friends and neighbors. How's the "starvation box" tuned up today? I heard a radio singer call his guitar that once, but later his starvation box made him a pile of dinero with a little tune he batted off called "Lay That Pistol Down, Babe." Remember it? Never can tell what will come out of one of them six-stringed gourds, can you?

This song about young folks getting started ranching brings to mind a younker I met while me and some of the boys was fishing this spring. We'd gone up into the mountains trying to get so far away from civilization that the fish wouldn't be all gone, and we come to as pretty a mountain stream as you ever saw, in mighty wild country. And while we was fishing, a young feller about nineteen comes up on a horse, and he's looking over a little shirttail full of cattle that's grazing along the stream. It's just about sundown, at the time, and we learn that he lives about a quarter of a mile upstream and has got a good well of water, so we go up to his house the next day.

A House Made of Logs

Well, the house is made out of logs and has got a clay floor, and there's a young mother, and the kid is out playing under a big sycamore. That night we took some fish up to them, and got the story of the lad we met.

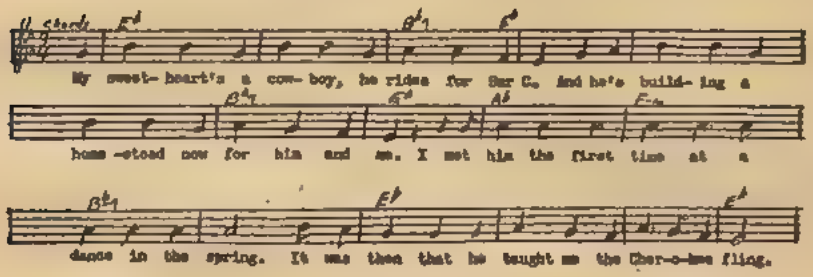
Well, him and the girl was both orphans and they'd married at seventeen, and both worked out till they could buy this little piece of land for a song at a tax sale. Then he'd got him a job on the big government project nearby, and every payday they could spare the money they bought another cow, and now they had fifteen. The boy plowed a garden at night after work and the wife worked it in the daytime and preserved enough food for them to eat the year round. And since they'd bought some hogs, the boy also plowed a big corn patch and worked it, also on moonlight nights after he'd ridden ten miles twice a day horseback, and done a day's work for the contractor.

The Future Looks Plumb Bright

They had chickens and pork on the hoof, and a few turkeys, and a cellar full of food for themselves and a corn crib full of food for their stock, so instead of killing off their calves to eat, they were letting them multiply, and buying more all the time. And still they lived in a dirt-floored cabin, like their ancestors had done maybe a hundred years ago.

There are lots of folks around who think the world owes 'em a living, but whenever I remember this fellow that lived in a cabin with a dirt floor when he was making enough money to live in comfort in town, all so's he could be independent, I decided that as long as there are still young folks like him and his wife, the future of this country looks plumb bright. What do you think about it?

MY SWEETHEART'S A COWBOY



2.

Oft we rode in the moonlight,
And he gave me a ring,
And I gave him my heart,
At that dance in the spring.

3.

He then wore a gun and
That gun he could use,
But he gave up gun-fighting,
And quit drinking booze.

4.

And now my own cowboy,
Rides a range of his own,
And I am so happy,
In my own little home.

5.

We've a big herd of cattle,
That's wearing our brand,
And two thousand acres
Of green grassy land

6.

And there's a young cowpoke
Of the ripe age of three,
The boys call him Butch
But he looks just like me.

7.

He has a paint pony
And he's learning to ride,
Dad calls him Segundo
And he's bursting with pride.

8.

We three are all happy,
In this life that we choose,
Since he gave up gun-fighting
And quit drinking booze.

Jeanie headed for the burning plane

WILDERNESS LOVE

Wyoming State Trooper Johnny Blake crashes head on into romance!

THE winter sun had been so pleasant all morning that Jeanie Barry left the cabin door open as she went singing about her chores. The grateful sunlight touched her smooth black hair, bringing out the blue lights, and lingering lovingly on the roses in her cheeks.

But it had been a deceptive warmth, such as came some days up here in the Wyoming mountains so close to the Canadian border. It was a long time yet before spring. Jeanie knew that as she glanced out through the door at the vast white plain that stretched away over the clearing around the cabin and far beyond the conifers laden with white to the snow-covered mountains. They enclosed the whole place like watching ermine-clad sentinels.

It didn't stay bright, not for long. Early in the afternoon it began to snow again—hard. Gray clouds covered the sunlight, and before long the whole

By VIRGINIA BRIGHTMAN

world was a swirling mist of white that clamped down like a cold hand.

Anxiously Jeanie went to the door to close it, and to call Major inside. Major, her constant companion, was mostly St. Bernard, but there was plenty of husky in him, too.

"The poor idiot," Jeanie muttered chidingly. "He thinks this snow is just for his special benefit. Hasn't got sense enough to come in where it's warm."

But in reality Major had plenty of sense. He had more sense than any dog in the world, Jeanie thought. What would she do up here in this lonely cabin without Major, anyway? Why, look how smart he was! It hadn't taken him any time at all to learn how to pull her around on the sled, and in the harness that Clem had made.

"Clem!" Jeanie thought, with an anxious frown, as Major came bounding up to her. "I'd hoped he'd get home before this snow set in. It's a regular blizzard!" She sighed. "I suppose he'll hole in some place now for a while. He had a long way to go to reach all his traps."

She was about to close the door when a sound in the sky made her look up, startled. It was the sound of a plane, and it was circling, as if whoever was piloting it had been so blinded by the snow he didn't kow where he was going.

"Another one!" Jeanie muttered, a frown crossing her lovely face. She got a glimpse of it, and recognized it for a Piper Cub. Another patrolling State policeman. That made three this week. Too many entirely. "Oh, well," she thought, as she closed the cabin door, "maybe this snow will drive him back. I hope so."

But she had not reached the big fireplace to drop on another log when from somewhere outside came a rending crash that seemed to shake the very mountains. And a sheet of flame through the swirling snow for a moment lit up the windows redly.

"Major!" Jeanie shouted. "What was that?"

But she knew. So did Major, whose frightened whining ended in a long-drawn howl.

The next minute Jeanie had grabbed up her sheepskin-lined coat from a hook, pushed her feet into her tall rubber boots, and was out of the cabin. She floundered through the snow, with Major leaping beside her, headed for that spot beyond the conifer-edged clearing where flame lighted the way. No matter if that pilot *was* a State policeman, he was a human being and he needed help—all she could give him.

In her heart was a prayer. If only he had been thrown clear! Jeanie closed her eyes against the thought that he might be in that blazing Piper Cub.

But he was not. Jeanie's prayer was answered. Major found him, a dark spot in the snow, feet away from the patrol plane.

Jeanie stumbled toward him, bent over the huddled, unconscious form.

"Major," she said grimly, "this is up to you. We've *got* to get him to the cabin, and I can't carry him or drag him."

They did get him there, after Jeanie had run back with Major for the sled. And that was how it came about that when Sergeant Johnny Blake, of the Wyoming State Police, opened his eyes, he found himself looking up into a face he thought the loveliest he had ever seen in his life.

IT WAS a white, startled face, with two terrified dark eyes studying him.

"Well, why not?" he thought, as swift memory came to him. The Piper Cub had crashed out here at the end of the beyond, and he didn't know how he had come here to this cabin, or who this girl was. "But what happened to me," he decided, "was enough to scare the wits out of any girl."

Then she spoke. "Nothing broken," she said. "I—I looked. But you've been badly bruised. I'm afraid your ankle's sprained. I've bandaged it."

"Who are you?" Johnny Blake asked huskily. He hardly recognized his own weak tones. "Do I—know you? I—it seems I must have known you—long time—yet I—"

In his still dimmed consciousness he supposed he ought to tell her he was a State policeman, on the trail for a long time of a man named Clem Barry who had killed his foreman down on his small ranch in southern Wyoming. But

it didn't seem worth while to tell all that. Probably she knew just who he was, from his uniform.

She did not answer him as she held out a cup of steaming broth.

"Drink this," she said. "Then go to sleep. You'll feel better when you wake up."

He drank as ordered, but could not keep his eyes off the girl. Just what was it about her that was—different—from any girl he had ever seen? Why, even when her hand touched his he felt something quiver all through him, and when she bent to straighten his pillow, and a strand of her satiny hair swept his face, sick and weak as he was, he felt his pulses leap.

"I know," he whispered, and smiled his winning smile. "Maybe I don't know you, but I must have been dreaming of you."

Jeanie didn't smile back. "Go to sleep," she repeated. "And dream some more—about something more important. You might use a little brain work on how you're going to get out of here. Your plane's gone, you know."

"Oh, I'm in no hurry," Johnny said sleepily.

"I am," said Jeanie, and started for the next room.

"But—but—" said the State police officer. "Hey, wait! How'd I get here? Your husband bring me? Where is he?"

"Away," she said. "I'm alone here, if you must know, so you'll do well to try to sleep so you can travel soon."

"You don't mean *you* dragged a hunk of man like me in here yourself!"

"Major and I did," she said, and nodded toward the big dog that was sitting on his haunches, regarding the trooper solemnly.

The girl hurried out through the door, and Johnny Blake sighed.

"So with all that heavy hospitality, Sergeant Blake," he mumbled, "I've an idea you'd better get out of here pronto."

He groaned, and went to sleep. . . .

It must have been a long and deep sleep, with no dreams at all, for when he awoke the sun was shining brightly through the windows. It was another day, and the storm was as completely gone as if it had never touched the white mountains outside.

In the room beyond he could hear the girl humming softly, now and then saying something to the dog. There was a muted clatter of pots and pans. She must be preparing a meal, he thought, but whether it was breakfast, dinner or supper Johnny could not guess, after that sleep of exhaustion.

He wanted to groan again, and not because he felt bad physically. In fact, he felt surprisingly well, all things considered. His ankle was not sprained, either, he discovered. He was standing on it, with complete success, when the door opened and the girl came in. She stopped short and her eyes widened, weary eyes now, Johnny thought, as he said to himself: "Sleepless Beauty. Worrying about you being here, Blake. You'd better hightail, for more reasons than one."

"Feeling better, Trooper?" she asked, and the brown eyes brightened. "Why, that's fine! You can walk. Now you can go right away, this afternoon!"

His lips twisted wryly. "Kind of a long trek it'll be, won't it? No plane."

"Oh, that's all right," she said quickly and, he thought, too eagerly. "Come on and get washed up, Trooper, and get something to eat. Then Major and I can take you down the mountain. Our nearest neighbor—it's only about five miles—has a sled, dogs. He can take you on to where you can reach the nearest post."

She was so anxious, and that something in her eyes he had noted before—terror, he was sure it was, as he caught her swift glances out the windows at the white, virgin world outside—that in that moment he was certain he knew the reason for it.

His lips twisted. "So you want me to go? I'm a right sick man, ma'am."

"Oh, yes, please!" she said earnestly. "Go as—just as soon as you can."

"Okay, ma'am." He shrugged. "Sure I'll go," and he added, as he heard her long sigh of relief, "You're plumb afraid *he'll* get back and find me here, aren't you?" He nodded toward the broad clearing beyond the windows.

She reddened, then turned as white as the snow out there. She bit her quivering lips and nodded.

"Y-yes. But you wouldn't understand. You'll go, though, won't you?"

"I told you I would," he said coldly.

MAYBE he understood this, all right, but he didn't like it. Nobody had ever suggested before that any man's wife might not be safe with Trooper Johnny Blake, whether they were all alone at the end of the world or not. But maybe that was way the fellow had her here—so no other man would ever see her. There was no accounting for the jealousy of some men. Darn it all, though, Johnny Blake *had* seen her, and that was the trouble.

"Just my luck," he thought. "Here I run into the girl I've been looking for all my life, and she would have to be married to another man!"

He turned toward the door leading into the other room, stopped and looked at her. She was standing in the center of the clean little room with its walls of hand-hewn logs, its brightly polished stove, its Indian blankets on the walls, and the two windows, with crisp, ruffled curtains. The sun shining through the windows glinted on her hair, seeming to make a halo around her head.

Always he would remember her like that, and even forgetting would not be easy.

"Just one thing," he said. "You haven't let me thank you for saving my life, but I do. It was a wonderful thing, how you did it. The only thanks I can give you now are in words. But remember this. If there is ever anything I can do for you, all you'll have to do is let me know. I'll be on hand pronto. That's all—now. I'm going, as you want me to. Don't bother about the dog and the sled. I'll make it somehow."

She looked up at him with startled dark eyes. "Maybe," she murmured, "I'll be asking you to keep that promise sooner than you guess, Trooper."

Then he was through the door and had closed it behind him. If that was the way she wanted it, okay. He wasn't a man to stay where he wasn't wanted, no matter how lovely a lady was.

He had shrugged into his sheepskin-lined coat, was looking around to make sure he hadn't left anything, when he heard a sound in the other room which brought him up short. It was the girl's voice, pleading, sobbing. Blake could catch only a few words of what she was hysterically saying:

"Go—go now! This minute! You've got to, before it's too late! Get out of here—fast!"

"Sounds like her theme song," Johnny Blake muttered wryly. "*Now* who is it?"

Slipping to the door he opened it a crack, and peered through. A tall, weather-tanned man whose shoulders all but choked the doorway stood there, arguing gently with the girl who was trying to push him out bodily. Blake gasped.

That face! He knew it only too well. It was the face of the man whose picture was attached to the arrest papers in his pocket. Clem Barry, the killer he had sought for months.

Grimly the State policeman slid the gun from his holster, slipped off the safety catch, and stepped into the other room.

"Well, Clem Barry," he said in a hard voice, "so we meet at last. You've led me a hard chase, hombre, but this is trail's end."

"No—no—that's not true!" the girl cried, and before Johnny could guess what she meant to do, she had thrown herself on him and was clinging to him, with both arms around his neck. "You told me you'd do anything I wanted you to! Just make him go—that's all I ask. He's just a trapper neighbor, and he came here because I'm alone . . . Oh, you must understand! Make him go on home. I can't have any trouble here! I mustn't! My—"

She broke off, sobbing, her head buried on Johnny's broad chest, holding to him so tightly that he could not lift his arms. She sure was strong—or was it desperate?

THE man in the doorway had made no move. Now he spoke, half humorously.

"Watch that gun, boy. It might go off. The safety's off, remember."

"You're my prisoner, Barry," Blake said harshly, and wondered how he was going to make it stick with that girl hanging around his neck. "I'm arresting you for killing your foreman at your

ranch in southern Wyoming months ago."

"Shore," said big Clem Barry. He had come in, and was leaning negligently against the log wall. "I'll go with you, and glad to. Put up the gun—you won't need it. I'm sick and tired of all this runnin' away."

THE girl was sobbing wildly now. "You won't! You won't! I won't let you!" Her small fists were beating against Johnny Blake's chest as though she could stave off the inevitable by sheer force.

"It's no use, Jeanie," Clem Barry said gently. "We've come to the end of our string. There's no use runnin' any more. Shouldn't have done it in the first place."

"Maybe you shouldn't have killed your foreman in the first place," Johnny Blake said sourly, still trying to extricate himself without hurting Jeanie. After all, she had saved his life. "Why'd you do it?"

"It was a fair fight," said Barry. "Matter of fact, he drew first, but I shot straighter."

"Why'd you do it?" Johnny repeated. "And you got any witnesses to that 'fair fight'?"

"Yes, he has!" suddenly cried Jeanie. "I saw it! I saw it all. And if you must know everything, that foreman was a—beast! He came to the ranchhouse when Clem was away. I fought him, and—and—well, he thought he'd killed me, and he ran away."

"I found her unconscious," said Clem grimly. "When she come to, and told me, I went after him."

"And I mounted a pony and went after Clem," declared Jeanie, the tears streaming down her soft cheeks. "I saw him try to shoot Clem, but Clem—got him."

"But man alive, Barry!" shouted Blake. "Why in time didn't you stick it out? Every man on the range would have backed you up, and fallen all over himself to shake your hand."

Big, weather-beaten Clem Barry grinned a little apologetically.

"Not every man on that ranch," he said. "There was some, like the sheriff—crooked as a dog's hind leg, he was—who'd been honin' to get us off that ranch for a long time, 'cause they wanted it for the good water, and it would have looked like a chance to do it. Wouldn't have done us any good to tell the sheriff the truth about that killin'. He'd of made out like he didn't believe us, and I'd of been strung up shore. Seemed like there wasn't nothing else to do but hightail. Didn't want Jeanie to come along, but she just would. And we been goin' hither and yon ever since, back of beyond. I'm glad it's over."

Johnny Blake looked down at the clinging Jeanie with an odd light in his eyes, and there was an awed note in his voice.

"The love of a loyal wife is a wonderful thing, Barry," he said softly.

"Shore," said Clem, with a whimsical grin. "Ain't nothin' wrong with the love of a loyal sister like Jeanie there, either . . . Jeanie, unwrap yourself and let the trooper do his duty."

"Jeanie," said Johnny Blake joyfully, "you stay right where you are. It's where I want you to be for good. Sure I'll do my duty. But my first move will be to get this fool business straightened out. You don't think I want a hangrope over the head of *my* brother-in-law, do you? You willing, Jeanie?"

In spite of the tears, Jeanie's dark eyes were shining as she gazed up at him.

She loosened one hand and pointed a finger at herself.

"Me?" she said. "You mean *me*? Oh, Tro-o-o-per!"

Then she was right back where she had started from.

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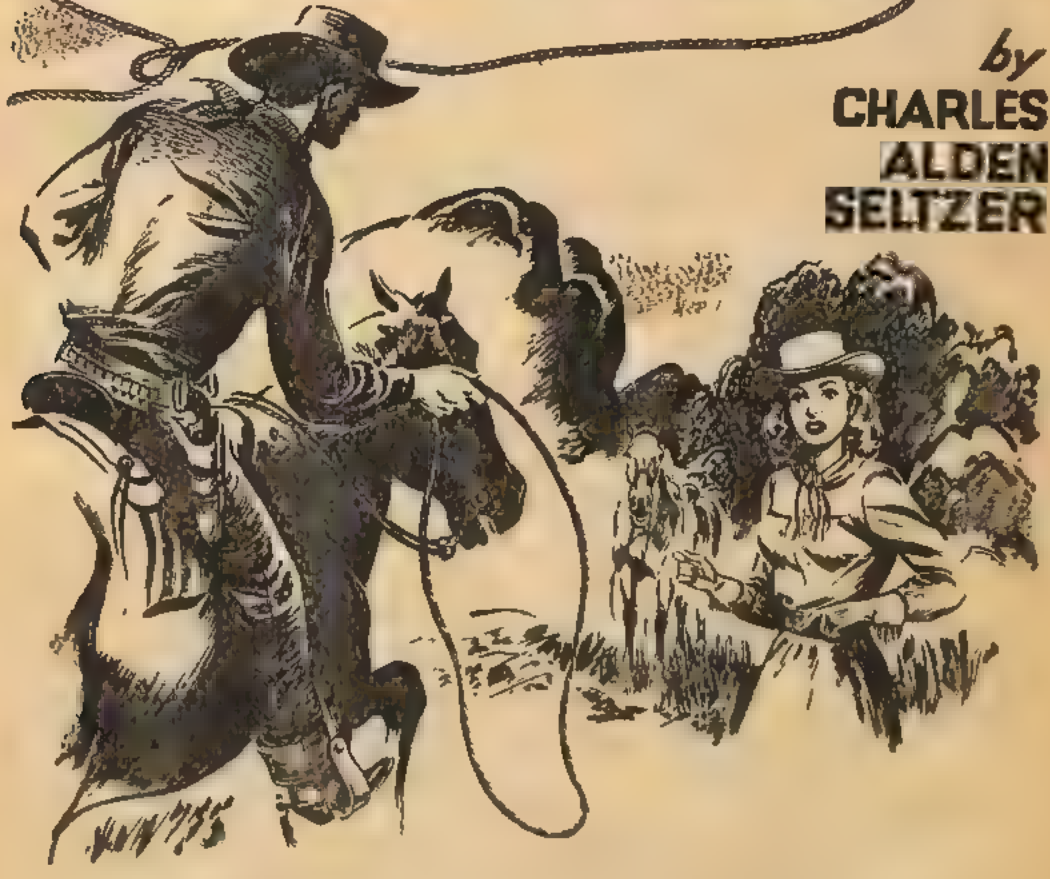
THE GIRL AND THE GAY RODEO RIDER, a glamorous novelet of the range by Stephen Payne, plus many other entertaining stories and features in the August issue of our companion magazine RODEO ROMANCES—now on sale, 15c at all stands!

Set Me a Task

by CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER



When the T Down cowhand took a job at the O Z Ranch, he had a brand of his own and it was spelled LOVE

EMERGING from a clump of shrubbery skirting the trail, the pony stopped on a rocky promontory that rose several feet above the dried river bottom. The rider drew one foot out of its stirrup, twisted crossways and leaned lazily against the saddle horn. A smile drew up the corners of his mouth, his eyes lighted with pure amusement.

Below him, in the natural basin formed by the action of the river in some previous time, there was a little drama being enacted.

A pony, saddled and bridled, was peacefully cropping the grass. Fifty feet away was a young woman, not so peaceful. Her arms were rigid at her sides in anger, fists clenched. Her face was a riot of disgust and anger.

Even as the rider watched, that expression of anger was replaced by one of deep guile. A happy smile was fixed upon her red lips. Her outstretched, gloved hand radiated friendliness.

"Here, Monte," she purred. "Good old Monte."

The cowpony, thus addressed by name, lifted his head from grazing and observed her with a cynical eye, chewing busily all the while. Then, as though what he saw was hardly worth his attention, he ignored her and went back to his browsing.

The girl took a forward step, hand outstretched. Monte paid no attention. Moving with utmost care and casualness, she advanced slowly upon him. He continued to ignore her. But when the girl was within a few feet of him, the cynical pony casually removed himself from the scene and established a new grazing ground at about the original distance from his would-be rider.

"Monte!" said the girl. "You—you—you—" She added several unladylike expressions.

The watching rider shook with silent amusement. He was not shocked. Even at this distance he could see how pretty the girl was, how splendid her figure in its short riding skirt, half boots and soft felt hat.

The pantomime began again. The girl inched forward, Monte observed her with a blase, slanted eye and practically sneered in her face as he moved out of reach once more.

After awhile she lost her temper and threw stones. None of them came near the horse, but Monte, enjoying the game hugely, pretended alarm and used that excuse to increase his distance to a hundred feet.

She tried another tactic. She held out a hand, pretending there was a lump of sugar in it. Monte allowed her to come close enough so that he could sniff the outstretched fingers, saw through the deception before she could grasp the bridle and was off again, free as a bird.

Now the girl resorted to woman's final card. She sat down on a flat rock and cried. Monte, being a brute, was unimpressed. But the cowboy, watching from above, found his amusement dissolving in her tears.

ON THE instant he urged his horse off the rock and down a short steep slope into the basin. He built a loop in his rope as he came.

The girl took her hands from her face as she heard his pony's hoofs and the cowboy saw the sparkle of tears on her cheeks.

"I reckon you're in trouble, ma'am," said the young man. "I've been watching you from the cliff."

"You have? I suppose you've been enjoying yourself!" she said indignantly. She began wiping her eyes hastily.

"Well," he admitted, "it's one of them things that sure might seem funnier to a bystander than to the principals, you might say. I sure got awful mad at that Monte though, for abusing you thataway."

"I suppose you heard me talking to him?" she demanded, face red.

"I ain't deaf, ma'am," he said, laughing. "I certainly enjoyed that dressing down you gave him. Fact, you didn't say half enough. He sure ain't no gentleman."

"Neither are you!" she snapped. "No gentleman would sit like a graven image while a lady was having trouble with her horse."

"I don't feel like a graven image," he said. He let his eyes absorb her, feeling a warm tide running slowly through him, a good clean feeling almost like relief—like a man feels when he comes home at last after a long time away. "How did he come to get away from you?"

She kept a dignified silence. But his sharp eyes found the dust on her skirts and the alkali patch on her shoulder.

"Threw you," he said.

"Yes."

"You're not hurt?"

"I don't imagine you'd care very much. A man who would sit and watch—"

"Why, ma'am—"

"—and laugh because a girl lost her temper—"

"I wasn't laughing so much at you, ma'am."

"—couldn't be expected to feel sorry if she'd broken her neck!"

"Why, ma'am, I didn't know he'd throwed you. I wouldn't want to see you

break your neck." He examined that neck with care as though searching for possible contusions and abrasions. Privately he was thinking he had never seen a prettier neck, nor a prettier face above it. "I'll get him for you, ma'am."

He was off at once, with a rattle of hoofs and a shower of sand. Monte came to life at once. He knew the comedy had entered a new act and he had a part to play. He put on a spirited race, but when the inevitable loop settled over his head he dropped all characterization and came trotting back, wearing an angelic expression of pure innocence.

The girl arranged her bridle rein and gave a few deft touches to the saddle before she swung aboard.

"I thank you," she said then, to the young man, her anger all gone. "I suppose I've been horrid to you. But I was nervous—and worried."

"Forget it," he said, smiling. "But you ain't going without letting me know who you are?"

"Oh, no." She smiled for the first time and the young man's heart began a tom-tom beat as he saw the miracle that took place. Her beauty was suddenly rich and vital and it engulfed him like a flood. "I'm Alicia Burroughs. My father owns the Z O ranch."

She saw a flush rise to his forehead. But he smiled. "I'm Bill Grant. I'm working over at the T Down."

He was silent for a moment while she arranged her skirts preparatory to departure. Then he spurred his pony closer.

"Ma'am," he said, "things is pretty quiet over at the T Down. I reckon there ain't much doin' at the Z O either?"

She considered him for a moment. "As a matter of fact," she said, "we're pretty busy. Father said yesterday that it would take him all his time to get the branding well along. It's awfully hard to get cowhands."

"I'm comin' over tomorrow for a job," he said quietly. "I like you real well. After we've got good enough acquainted I'm going to marry you."

Surprise widened her eyes, then they turned mocking. "You are? I suppose I'm to have nothing to say about that?"

He had urged his horse around and now looked back at her over his shoulder. "Of course you will," he answered. "But you'll say 'yes.' "

"Modest, aren't you?" she gibed, but the only answer was the clatter of his pony's hoofs as he departed up the slope from whence he had come.

EARLY one morning nearly a month later, John Burroughs, owner of the Z O ranch, was sitting at a window of his office which overlooked the lower gallery of the ranch house. Beyond, he could see the corral, where several of his cowboys were hard at work amid the reek and dust. They were roping yearlings and one of the men was particularly expert with his lariat.

As Burroughs watched, this cowboy stalked a yearling which showed clearly that it wanted no part of the game. It pressed itself among its fellows and tried to become invisible. The man with the rope would not be denied. Patiently he worked out the maze, cutting the yearling out, driving him into the clear.

Several times the frantic animal dashed back into the press and got tangled up again before the rope could be cast. But at last the rope darted out, was carried swiftly around the snubbing post and the thing was done. A moment later the yearling was carrying his new ZO mark for the world to see.

Burroughs leaned back in his chair with a laugh. "That's the kind of a man who gets what he goes after," he mused. "Grant he said his name was." He watched while Grant roped another steer. "Guess I like that determined kind. Like me." He stroked his mustache fondly. Then a new idea struck him. "By George! I didn't think of that!"

He got up and stalked to the door leading into the ranchhouse itself.

"Alicia!" he called.

In a moment the girl came through the doorway.

"Come in," Burroughs invited.

She seated herself near the window from where she could see the corral.

"You see that young man down in the corral—the one swinging the rope?"

"Of course." Alicia blushed.

"What's his name?"

"Grant," said the girl, with averted face.

"H'm. You know his name all right, don't you?"

Alicia nodded. Then she turned and looked her father squarely in the face. "Well?" she challenged.

"I've seen you and him riding together pretty much in the last week or two. I didn't think to ask before—but what does it mean?"

Alicia took a deep breath. "It could mean lots of things, Daddy, but in this case it means I love him and I am going to marry him. If you don't mind," she added as an afterthought.

Burroughs looked out the window. "If I don't mind, eh?" he said. "You're going to marry him if I don't mind." He looked back at her. "Alicia, I've always given you everything you wanted, haven't I?"

She nodded without speaking.

"How far has this thing gone?" he asked.

"He's asked me to marry him."

"And what do you know about him?"

"I know he is a gentleman," she said quietly.

Burroughs smiled. "They're all that, when you're in love. What I want to know is what was he before he came to the Z O and where did he come from?"

"Why—I imagine he was always a cowpuncher. He came here from the T Down."

"The T Down!" Burroughs brought a fist crashing down upon the desk top. "How did he have the nerve to come here after working for the T Down? Why didn't I ask him before I hired him? I'd have kicked him clear off the ranch!"

"But father—"

Burroughs held up a hand. He was suddenly very calm. "Alicia," he said, "maybe I should have told you this before. But I thought it might never become necessary. Now I've got to tell you. Listen.

"Twenty years ago, Everton, who owned the T Down, put a bullet in my shoulder during a quarrel over your mother. It didn't do him any good because I married her anyway. But there's always been bad blood between us and it spread to the boys working for us. There's been many a fight because of it. And I never spoke to old Everton from that day to this."

"He's not still living, is he, daddy?"

"No, he's dead. This boy of his, who's east in college, owns the ranch. I've heard he's going to sell it and I hope he does. That will get the trash out of the way."

"I don't see how that affects Mr. Grant," said Alicia.

"It oughtn't to," Burroughs admitted. "But I can't help feeling that anyone who comes from the T Down is tainted with the old grudge. Maybe I'm wrong, but I can't get free of the feeling. And nothing has ever happened to make me change it."

"I'm sure if you talked to him you'd change your mind," Alicia urged. "Really, daddy, he's the nicest—" she broke off and blushed furiously as Burroughs looked queerly at her.

"I'm *going* to talk to him," he said suddenly.

He rose and went out upon the gallery floor. "Grant!" he called, "Grant!"

THE man who was roping in the corral looked up and saw the rancher's arm motion. He passed his rope to another cowboy and climbed the corral fence. Burroughs came back into the room and after a few minutes the tall young man who had once caught Alicia's pony, filled the doorway. His lithe figure was erect, his eyes filled with inquiry as he looked at Burroughs. He did not look at the daughter.

"Come in, Grant," Burroughs rumbled. "My daughter—you know my daughter, don't you?"

"We've met," Grant replied easily.

"So I heard," Burroughs said with a trace of irony. "Well, Alicia tells me you came here from the T Down."

"That's right."

"Why didn't you tell me that when you hired on?"

"You didn't ask me."

Burroughs opened his mouth, then closed it. "That's right, I didn't," he muttered. "Didn't you know there was a feud on between the Z O and the T Down?"

"I'd heard about it, yes," Grant returned. "But it wasn't my feud and I didn't figure it had anything to do with me."

"Did you know old Everton?"

Grant nodded.

"Did you know that him and me never got on?"

"Yes."

"Then what I want to know is why did you come over here to work?"

The young man smiled. "I came over to marry Alicia," he replied.

"You're frank enough about it," Burroughs said. He glanced at his daughter who sat rigid, watching and listening. "You've asked her?"

"Yes, sir."

The girl blushed and shot a pleading look at her father. He caught the look and a gleam of humor lightened the sternness of his face. He drummed absently on the desk for a moment while Grant and the girl exchanged their first glance. Then the rancher spoke again.

"Grant," he said, "I've been watching you ever since you got here and I sized you up as one of them determined characters that wouldn't let anything get between you and what you want. I reckon you'd do most anything to get Alicia?"

"I'd rustle cattle for her," stated the young man.

Burroughs smiled. "You've been man enough to come out flatfooted and say what you come over here for. So I reckon I got to be man enough to tell you a few things. I've got different plans for Alicia.

"She ain't going to marry no scrub cowpuncher. Some day, when I've made enough money out of this here cattle business, I'm going back east, where I come from. Then Alicia is going to marry some one who knows something besides punching cows. She's going to marry a man who's had some education and can do something with his life."

Burroughs paused and shot a keen glance at the young man. "I'm sorry if that hurts, son," he said, not unkindly. "But it's the truth." He paused and seemed to change the subject.

"Do you remember the fairy stories we read as kids? The Prince wanted to marry the Princess, but the old King said before he could get her he had to fight a dragon, or climb a glass mountain, or swim a lake of fire. It sounded plumb cruel, but it wasn't so unreasonable as it sounded. The King just wanted to be sure his daughter got a real man, not a cream puff. And whatever the job was the Prince usually licked it and got the girl.

"Well, those were fairy tales. In real life the Prince ain't always a Prince and he don't pan out much to the ton. Which, I reckon, is the real reason for a test. Now Alicia's in love and she don't know whether she'd be making a mistake or not. So here's me—the cruel old King—with a test for you. And son, this is a tough one. Fact, I wouldn't be a heap surprised if it couldn't be done. I'm tellin' you that beforehand, because I don't want you coming back here with any excuses if you fail."

"Let's have it," Grant said, white-lipped.

BURROUGHS nodded. "All right. Twenty years ago, I tried to buy some white Herefords from old Everton. We had a quarrel over them and I didn't get them. I ain't never tried to get any Herefords since. I've swore I'd get them from the T Down or I wouldn't have any. While old Everton was alive I couldn't get 'em. He hated me so bad he'd have poisoned me long ago if he weren't afraid of the law.

"Now I hear that since he's dead his son is going to run the T Down. I've been told the son hates me as much as the old man did, but that's whatever. Now here's the thing. I still want them white Herefords. It's fifty miles from here to T Down. That's a day's ride and a two day drive back here with one hundred white Herefords. Three days in all."

He looked at Grant, whose face was impassive. "You get back here before sundown on the third day with one hundred white Herefords from the T Down and you get Alicia. No Herefords—don't come back. Because if you show up again on this range I'll come gunning for you and I won't stop until I get you. Are you saying anything?"

The young man smiled. "You won't go back on that?" he asked.

"I won't. But remember. Them Herefords have got to be from the T Down. And you've got to bring a bill showing that old Everet's son is doing the selling —to me." He laughed a little rustily. "I reckon you'll find that whipping a dragon, or climbing glass mountains and

swimming lakes of fire is a cinch compared with that little job."

Grant looked at Alicia. "I'm going to the T Down," he said. "I'll be back on the third day."

He hitched up his cartridge belt, smiled and went out. Ten minutes later, Alicia and Burroughs watched him ride into the fifty miles of plain that lay between the Z O and the T Down. They watched until he dwindled to a dot and disappeared. Then Burroughs turned to his daughter and strangely enough, laughter moved behind the curtains of his eyes.

"Durned if I ain't almost sorry I sent the cuss away," he said. "I kind of like him a little myself." He saw suspicious moisture in Alicia's eyes and added hastily, "But if he's got the real Prince stuff in him, he'll whip the stuffin' out of that dragon without no trouble at all!"

At three o'clock in the afternoon of the third day, from his office window, Burroughs saw the dust cloud growing larger on the horizon.

He pulled the chair nearer to the window to watch.

In half an hour it began to take shape. Finally he could see a number of dots, strung in a line over the plains. He sighed and leaned back. "Darned if I ain't glad," he muttered.

He fumbled for his pipe, lighted it and smoked in silence. Presently came Alicia to the gallery, to shade her eyes and peer anxiously out at the plain.

"Alicia!" Burroughs called.

She came in, her eyes aflame with excitement.

"He's comin', Alicia."

"I knew he'd come," she said. "Do you think they're Herefords—from the T Down?"

Burroughs smiled. "He's a determined man, Alicia."

For an hour they sat and watched while the dots grew and took shape, coming ever nearer. Burroughs smiled enigmatically.

"They're white Herefords, Alicia," he said.

The cattle poured into the corrals, herded by a figure recognizable as Grant and two capable assistants. Then Grant dismounted, hitched his pony to the corral fence and strode forward. In a few moments he stood in the doorway again, his face wreathed in a grin.

HIS look at Alicia told the girl what she wanted to know. Then he walked forward and laid a piece of paper before Burroughs. It was a bill of sale for one hundred White Hereford cows from the T Down. But looking over her father's shoulder, Alicia saw, with a sudden clutch of fear, that it was not signed.

Burroughs looked at it, then up at Grant. "You brought one hundred Herefords," he said. "I counted 'em as they went through the gate. But where's young Everton's signature on this bill?"

His tone struck fear to Alicia's heart and brought pallor to her face. "Daddy—" she began.

But Grant only smiled. "You got a pen here?" he asked.

Burroughs gave him one. The young man drew the bill toward him and scrawled, "William Grant Everton."

"Good heavens!" said Alicia Burroughs.

The young man turned an embarrassed face toward her. "You had to know it sometime," he said. "But I wanted to tell you in my own way. I didn't lie very hard," he pleaded. "Meetin' you was enough to make any man forget his own name and everything else."

Burroughs reached into the drawer again and brought out a photograph. Grant gasped in surprise.

"That's dad!" he exclaimed.

"Sure," said Burroughs. "Taken twenty years ago. It's a little faded, but it's enough to show that when he was your age he was as much like you as two peas in a pod. And you reckoned to fool me? Why I knowed you the minute you rode up and asked for a job. And what's more, I knowed you hadn't come over here just to punch cows. The minute I saw you with Alicia I knowed what you come for."

He laughed and shot a mischievous glance at his confused daughter. "But I wasn't going to give up to the Evertons about them Herefords so I sent you after them. Now I've got them, just as I tried to get them from your dad." He smiled

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Sharpshooter Girl

Gwen took careful aim and fired

by MONICA MORTON

THE rifle flamed and cracked as Gwen Stuart fired from the saddle while her pony was on the run. But this time she failed. There was a final spurt of dust as the coyote dashed into the brush and to safety.

"Aw, heck! Missed him!" Gwen said in disgust. She pulled up her pony to give him a breathing spell.

She levered a fresh cartridge into the chamber of her rifle so she would be ready if new game appeared. Hunting coyotes from the saddle was her favorite sport. Her grim Scotch father, old Jock Stuart, who owned this vast acreage near the Border, known as the Circle S ranch, often told her she would probably be killed some day when she was out alone and her speeding pony stumbled and fell. But Gwen merely laughed at his admonition.

The bunkhouse crew of the Circle S

A Pistol-Packin' Lady Meets a Loco Hombre!

and the people of the entire district called her the sharpshooter girl. She could use rifle and six-gun with a speed and accuracy that was astounding. She often roamed the ranch hunting coyotes. She considered it not only good sport, but felt she was helping to rid the ranch of a distructive pest.

As her pony rested now, Gwen adjusted the chin strap of her sombrero and glanced up at the sun to estimate the time. She decided she had ample time to ride to the next crest of the semi-arid land and see if any coyotes were in the brush there.

Erect in her saddle, Gwen made a pretty picture. She was rather tall, with dark hair and lively eyes. She had turned aside all suitors so far, especially one Walt Barden, foreman of a large ranch adjoining the Circle S. When the right man came drifting along, and she was sure he really thought more of her than of the value of the vast ranch she would inherit some day, that would be something different.

Her piebald pony, Spotty, snorted his impatience. Gwen touched him with her spurs and urged him on. They went through some brush and started the ascent of a gravel slope. Gwen still watched for coyote sign.

At the top of the slope was a ledge of rock half obscured by the dry brush. Little whirlwinds of dust were swirling. The wind was blowing strongly toward Gwen, and she could hear sounds coming from the near distance when a person there could not hear her approach.

The pony came to the end of the ledge of rock, snorted, and Gwen pulled him to an abrupt stop.

"Easy, Spotty!" she cautioned.

GWEN had heard a man's voice coming to her on the wind, and out there he might be almost any sort of man. Not that Gwen was afraid. Her rifle and six-gun could take care of her.

She lifted herself in the saddle and glanced down the slope on the other side of the ledge. That was the first time she ever saw Bill Hatchley, and at that time she didn't even know his name.

Gwen frowned slightly, because here was something she could not understand. He was not more than a hundred feet away, his back toward her. She was puzzled by his actions and words.

He was alone out there with a bay pony, and he has dismounted. A young range rider, from his general appearance. Tall, slender, wide shoulders and narrow hips, light brown hair—not bad! The way he was standing, Gwen could not have a good look at his face.

Nobody else seemed to be in the vicinity. There he was, this stranger of twenty-eight or so, she judged, standing beside his pony where no sensible cowboy would be afoot unless necessity compelled. And he was talking to his pony! Not cussing him out for some fault as a sensible cowboy might be doing. The wind carried his voice to Gwen's ears plainly:

"This here is good-by, little pal. This here is the end. Only thing I hate about it is leavin' you. But you'll get along somehow after I'm gone. You're a cute little bronc, and some hombre will pick you up and give you a home. If he don't treat you right, I'll come back and haunt him."

Gwen frowned again. Why, this hombre was plain loco! Animals sometimes ate loco weed and did strange things afterward, but she'd never known a range rider to do so.

As Gwen watched, he stepped up to the pony and put his arm around the creature's neck. That was all right. A lot of cowboys loved their ponies and petted them. But the stranger went on with that queer talk:

"The end of the trail for me, little pal. Life ain't worth livin' any more. I can't face the future. I let them hellions swindle me out of my ranch, and gamblers got everything else. So it's good-by."

Gwen bent forward in her saddle, holding her rifle, and watched closely. She saw the stranger step a few feet away from his pony. He turned half way toward her, and Gwen saw he was not at all bad looking.

Then she saw something that startled her. The man she was watching took his six-gun out of its holster, slowly, deliberately, acting as if reluctant to do it. He looked at the pony again and turned aside, then slowly raised the gun, the muzzle ascending, toward his temple.

Gwen snapped from her frozen atti-

tude. Why, this hombre was about to shoot himself! "I can't face the future," he had said.

She knew she had to act quickly if she was to prevent him from committing his rash act. She could yell at him, but the wind was blowing strongly in the opposite direction, and he might not hear. Her cry might cause him to hasten his own destruction.

There was but one thing to be done, and Gwen did it. She threw her rifle to her shoulder, took quick aim, and fired. As she felt the gun recoil against her shoulder, and spurred Spotty around the end of the ledge of rock and down the slope toward him, she saw him drop his six-gun and reel to one side. His right arm hung down and his hand dangled.

He turned toward her when he heard Spotty's hoofbeats. His face was white and he looked like a man in great pain. But he straightened his body when he saw the girl riding toward him, and held his right arm with his left hand. When Gwen stopped Spotty beside him, his face was a picture of rage.

"Did you shoot me?" he demanded.

"That I did, hombre."

"What you want to do that for? I never did you any harm. Don't even know who you are."

"What you want to kill yourself for?" Gwen demanded in turn. "Think I'd stand by and watch you do a thing like that? I didn't have time to do anything but shoot. Yelling at you might not have done any good."

"You've busted my right forearm," he informed her. "For nothin'!"

HURRIEDLY, Gwen tossed the reins over Spotty's head to ground-hitch him and sprang out of her saddle. She put her rifle into its saddle boot, but kept her six-gun in its holster.

"I'll tie up your arm with my neckcloth," she told him. "Then we'll ride to the ranchhouse. You're on Circle S land, and I'm Gwen Stuart, daughter of the owner."

"I've heard tell of the wild girl on the Circle S, but I didn't reckon she'd be ridin' around the range shootin' innocent folks. My name's Bill Hatchley."

"Maybe I should have let you kill yourself," Gwen said. "A man's a coward who'd do a thing like that, and a coward isn't fit to live. The idea! Killing yourself and leaving your pony alone in the world! Just because you were swindled out of a ranch and let some tinhorn gamblers get what was left! A real man would laugh it off and get busy and make double the amount back."

"Yes'm," Bill Hatchley said. His lips twisted a little. Gwen thought because of a twinge of pain, and then decided he was trying to keep from laughing.

"What's so funny about a fit of despair and a busted forearm" she asked.

"What you was sayin' about my affairs."

"The wind was blowing toward me, and I heard you talking to your pony and understood every word you said."

"Maybe so, ma'am. But that was only play actin'."

"You'd better explain that," Gwen told him, as she finished bandaging his wounded arm with her neckcloth.

"Well, you know the rodeo at Sage Center next month?"

"Sure. The Circle S outfit goes in every year and builds camp, and brings home most of the prizes."

"Well, ma'am, this year they're goin' to have somethin' a little extra. 'Scenes in the Life of a Cowboy', they're callin' it. Hired some hombre to come here and make up the show. It's to be put on in the arena the last afternoon of the rodeo."

"What about it?" Gwen asked.

"In an unguarded moment, ma'am, I promised to do some play-actin' in the show. When you heard me a few minutes ago, I was just doin' what they call rehearsin'."

"Do you have to ride away out here miles from nowhere to rehearse?"

"No'm. I was on my way to the Box M to see if I could get me a job, and was cuttin' 'cross country. Thought I'd give my pony a breathin' spell and rehearse at the same time. Wish I could get back my promise. I feel like a dadburned fool play actin'. I'll prob'ly make a botch of it come rodeo time."

Gwen sat down on a convenient boulder. Her face twisted, then she couldn't hold the laughter back. It rang out on the wind unrestrained.

"First you shoot a hombre, and then you laugh at him," Bill Hatchley said. "I reckon you're heartless."

That sobered her and the laughter stopped. "I'm not heartless, Bill Hatchley," she defended. "Nobody ever called me that before. But I couldn't help laughing. Me thinking you were going to kill yourself, on account of what I heard you say—"

"I reckon it did sound that way," he admitted.

"Anyhow, this may be a lucky thing for you. That wound doesn't look bad to me. Bullet went through, and you'll be healed in a few days. And you've got a job without riding on to the Box M. I'll make Dad give you one. Get on your pony, and we'll hit for the ranchhouse."

They mounted and started off side by side, going toward the trail that ran toward the Circle S.

"How come you're looking for a job?" Gwen asked him.

"Oh, I've been workin' for the Tumbleweed outfit, fifty miles east o' here, for 'bout eight months, but me and the foreman can't get along. Never had any trouble with a foreman. Anyhow, I made up my blanketroll and got my pay and hit the trail. You can make inquiries if you think there's somethin' wrong with me. Thought I'd drift over this way. Been loafin' around Sage Center for a week, learnin' about this country. Somebody told me the Box M needed a man, so I was hittin' for there."

"The Box M has the meanest foreman in the country, Walt Barden. It's a good thing I shot you. We've got an old-timer in the Circle S bunkhouse who's a wizard with gunshot wounds. He always fixes up the boys when they get wild and reckless and open up on one another."

"Sounds like a nice, peaceful outfit," Bill suggested. "If you tell 'em I'm a play actor, they'll prob'ly perforate me some with hot lead."

His arm began paining when they were half way to the ranchhouse, and Gwen saw him biting his lips as a counter-irritant against the pain.

"If you can stand it, we'll spur up and get that arm fixed quicker," she said.

So they used their spurs.

WHEN they reached the ranchhouse, Gwen's father was down at the corral talking to Uncle Ed, the old-timer. Both men looked up with interest as the two ponies approached and stopped. Gwen jumped out of her saddle and Bill Hatchley dismounted rather stiffly.

"Dad," Gwen said, "I shot this hombre by mistake. Have Uncle Ed patch him up, and give him a job. His name's Bill Hatchley."

"Yuh—yuh shot him by mistake?" Jock Stuart gulped. "What yuh mean by that?"

"I'll explain later, Dad. You get busy on his arm, Uncle Ed. If it's bad, we'll send to town for the sawbones."

"I'll patch him up," Uncle Ed replied in his squeaky voice. He beckoned to Bill and started hobbling toward the bunkhouse, and Hatchley followed. A horse wrangler who had been leaning against the corral gate strolled forward to care for the ponies.

So Bill Hatchley came to the Circle S, and upset things to a certain degree.

Uncle Ed's surgery and medication was of the rough sort, but he knew his business, and there was no need to send to Sage Center for the doctor.

Bill Hatchley's arm was cleansed and a dressing and bandages applied, and he undid his blanketroll and made himself at home, meeting the other men as they came in from work and settling down as one of the Circle S crew.

Crafty old Jock Stuart, sensing there might arise an interest between Gwen and Hatchley, wrote a letter to the owner of the Tumbleweed ranch and sent a man with it the fifty miles east, and he returned with a letter from the Tumbleweed's owner.

Bill Hatchley was all right, was the report. He was a good worker, a sensible young man, and had money in the bank, left him by an uncle. He had rolled up his blankets and left the Tumbleweed as he had said, to avoid trouble with a foreman who did not like him, rather than stay on and fight and upset the outfit.

Bill was unable to work at first, so he accompanied Gwen on her wild rides

after coyotes. They grew acquainted rapidly, and Gwen began having the feeling that here was the man for whom she had been waiting.

She liked his drawling talk, his roguish eyes, his tender manner. He never tried familiarities. In fact, he kept himself aloof to a greater extent than Gwen really wanted. His arm was healing rapidly, and as it healed, Bill kneaded his fingers and wrist to keep them flexible. When Uncle Ed said the time had come to remove the final bandage, the wrist and fingers would be in condition to whip a gun out of holster or handle reins or rope.

On these excursions, when they were letting their ponies rest, Gwen made Bill rehearse his part in the forthcoming rodeo show.

"The Circle S takes prizes in everything at the Sage Center rodeo, and we're not going to miss out in this playacting," she informed him. "You've got to be the prize actor, Bill, whether there's a prize or not."

"Don't you reckon I could get out of this playactin', if I sent in word that I'd been shot and hurt?"

"Don't want you to get out of it," she told him. "I want you to be the hit of the show. Haven't you any ambition?"

"Not for bein' known as a play actor," Bill said.

JOCK STUART gave a barn dance and party for Gwen's twenty-first birthday, and it drew guests for many miles around. The hospitality of the big Circle S was well known and appreciated. The fact that he was Scotch did not prevent Jock Stewart from putting on this party with a lavish hand.

The big barn was emptied of vehicles and livestock, cleaned thoroughly and nicely decorated. A platform was erected at one end for the musicians. Guests began arriving before sunset, and continued coming until it was almost time for the dancing to start.

Long tables were set beneath the spreading trees and loaded with all sorts of food. Hot dishes and coffee would be ready at the proper hour.

Dressed in a new white frock she had made herself, Gwen received her guests with her father standing beside her. Her face was flushed prettily and her eyes danced as she smiled her welcomes.

She turned from one guest to meet the next, and found Walt Barden standing before her, on his lips that thin smile she did not like. The foreman of the Box M had a rather sinister look about him. He caused her to have a creepy feeling, Gwen often had told her father.

Walt Barden expressed the usual congratulations, then bent nearer and lowered his voice:

"I'm claimin' the first dance, Gwen."

"Sorry, but it's been claimed already," she told him, smiling to take some of the sting out of her refusal. "After that, Walt I'll have a couple of dances for you."

He frowned, and had to move on without saying anything more, for other guests had arrived. The musicians warmed up and then began playing. The guests had chosen partners, but waited against the walls for Gwen to open the dance. That was the usual way in the district. The guest of honor always opened the dance with a man of her selection, and they went upon the floor before any of the others.

Her face burning, Gwen crossed the room and stopped in front of Bill Hatchley. An instant later, she was in his arms, and they had waltzed out upon the floor.

Other couples followed until the dancing space was crowded.

By selecting the little known Bill Hatchley as her partner for the opening dance of her birthday party, Gwen created something of a sensation. People began asking one another about him. And, as they danced, Gwen's keen interest in him was apparent in her face. She glanced up at him continually, whereas Bill looked over her shoulder and straight ahead as they danced, his face like a mask.

Walt Barden did not participate in the opening dance. Standing near the wide open front door, he watched Gwen and her partner, and his eyes began gleaming. Some of the guests were glancing his way, little smiles twisting their lips, and Barden knew they were whispering about him, wondering how he was taking this. The whole range knew he had

been one of Gwen's most persistent suitors.

The first dance ended, and Bill strolled toward the front door, wiping the perspiration from his face. He did not claim a partner as the second dance began. He went on to the door and stepped out into the moon-drenched night.

Barden had gone out before him, and had strolled around to the side of the barn, where a keg of liquor had been set out. As Bill emerged from the barn, Barden came back around the corner of the building with a couple of his Box M men. He stopped in front of Bill.

"You're Bill Hatchley, huh?" he asked.

"That's right."

Gwen, as the second dance ended, stopped near the door and was in time to see and hear.

"I'm Walt Barden, foreman of the Box M."

"Howdy!" Bill said.

"Hatchley, somethin' tells me that this part of the country ain't big enough to hold both of us."

"Well, now," Bill drawled, "if that's true it'll shore work a hardship on you. If you're foreman of the Box M, that means you've been here quite some time and worked your way up. To drop all that and leave will set you back some."

"I ain't intendin' to leave!"

"You said the country here ain't big enough for us both, and I aim to remain," Bill said, his voice having an edge on it now.

"We'll see!"

"I reckon so," said Bill.

"Maybe you'd like to step around back of the barn and settle this right now!" Barden said.

"Nope, and for two reasons. First is, I don't brawl at a nice party like this and don't aim to insult the hostess and the ranch by doin' it. Second reason is, my right forearm ain't healed and strong yet, and the fight wouldn't be fair for that reason. I'll be seein' you later, Barden—if you stay hereabouts."

BARDEN saw Gwen standing in the doorway, and turned away, muttering to his men. Bill rolled and lit a cigarette and smoked peacefully as if nothing had happened. Gwen hurried out of the barn and up to him.

"You handled that worm just right, Bill," she said. "He's angry because I wouldn't open the dance with him. He's been pestering me for about three years, and I despise him."

He looked down at her. "I'm right glad I ain't the one you despise," he drawled. That was the nearest he had ever come to revealing an interest in her. . . .

The rides continued after the evening of the party—the coyote hunting, and twice a ride to town to get the ranch mail. Out on the ranch, where there was nobody to see or hear, Gwen made Bill go through that little scene with the pony. She rehearsed him until he could have done it properly even though he was shaking and weak with stage fright.

His arm continued healing, and then came a day when old Uncle Ed took off the bandages for the last time and massaged the arm well, kneading the cords and muscles. Bill flexed his fingers continually, practised drawing his gun and handling his reins with his right hand, even going so far as using his rope.

Gwen realized one day that she loved him. But he spoke no word to her to show her that her affection was returned. However, his manner when he was with her, and the way he looked at her, told her much. She wondered why he did not speak.

They went coyote hunting another day, followed a ridge of rimrock toward a sea of dry brush, flushed a couple of coyotes and chased them down a slope.

Gwen rode ahead, with Bill a short distance behind and on her left. Her rifle barked, and one coyote turned a somersault and landed against a rock. The other fled straight down the slope. Gwen dug with her spurs and sent Spotty in pursuit as she levered a fresh cartridge into the chamber of her rifle.

Suddenly, what Jock Stuart often had predicted, came to pass. Spotty stumbled on a small rock embedded in the ground. He lurched forward. Gwen left the saddle and flew through the air, her rifle spinning off to one side. She struck the ground with force, and sprawled, insensible.

Bill sprang from his saddle and ran

forward to see if she was badly hurt. Her eyes were closed and she was moaning. He ran back to his pony and got his canteen off the saddle, and returned. Lifting her head, he tried to pour some water into her mouth. He poured it upon her face, too, bathed her forehead with her neckcloth, calling to her as he worked:

"Gwen! Gwen, honey! You've just got to be all right! Open your eyes and do some talkin' to me, honey. If anything bad happened to you—"

Gwen heard that as if from a far distance. The shock of her fall was wearing off swiftly. Her body might be bruised, but there were no broken bones.

"Gwen—honey—" she heard again, and this time the voice seemed nearer.

Half sobbing, Bill bent his head and kissed her while he held her closer. Groping, and only half conscious of what she did, Gwen put up an arm and finally got it around his neck. Then she returned his kiss, and opened her eyes.

"Are you all right?" Bill whispered. "You about scared me to death!"

Gwen smiled. "I think I'm all right. Just knocked the wind out of me. How's Spotty."

"He seems all right. Walkin' around and limpin' a little. He didn't bust a leg."

"Don't you tell anybody about this spill, Bill. Dad wouldn't let me hunt coyotes again."

"I'll keep quiet about it."

"Bill—you kissed me and called me 'honey'," she accused.

"I just couldn't help it. I've been keepin' my feelin's choked back—"

"It's all right with me, Bill. I've been wanting you to kiss me and call me pretty and tender names. So it's all right. Kiss me again, and help me up."

Bill complied. She strode around a moment and decided nothing was broken. She knew her shoulder was bruised, but that didn't amount to much. She was too happy to pay much attention to a bruised shoulder.

So they rode back to the ranchhouse, to confront old Jock Stuart and tell him they had decided to be married. Jock grinned.

"I've seen it comin' for some time," he told them. "I've checked on Bill, and he's all right. Yuh can be married after the Sage Center rodeo, if that suits yuh."

NOW that they had acknowledged their love for each other, Gwen's attitude became one of fierce possessiveness. She was the sort to fight for her man, or stand beside him and fight with him against a common foe.

Almost every day they had long rides together, and Gwen had Bill rehearse his part for the rodeo show. Then came another morning when Jock Stuart asked them to take some mail to town for him and bring back any ranch mail waiting at the Sage Center post office.

They loped along easily over the eight miles to town, stealing a kiss every now and then as their horses came close. At last they tied their ponies to the hitch-rail in front of Sage Center's principal store, in which the post office was located.

They got the mail, then Gwen did some shopping to get goods for new rodeo costumes, which the Circle S housekeeper would help her make. Bill bought cigarette tobacco and papers, and hard candy, and a present for Gwen when she was not watching him.

She was still busy at the counter as Bill strolled out of the store and stopped at the hitch-rail to wait for her. From a saloon next door, Walt Barden emerged with two of his Box M men.

Finishing her trading, Gwen strolled to the front door in time to see and hear the scene. She watched as Barden strode up to Bill and stood in front of him.

"I understand your arm is healed," Barden said.

"That's right."

"And there ain't any party here, so you wouldn't be insultin' your ranch or its hostess if you were inclined to do a little fightin'."

"Right again," Bill said.

"I warned you to get away from this part of the country!"

"Wait a second! That's wrong!" Bill declared. "You said the country hereabouts wasn't big enough for us both, but it wasn't agreed which of us was to leave."

"Out in the street, there's plenty of room to settle it," Barden said.

"Suits me!" Bill replied.

They stepped down off the sidewalk and strode to the middle of the street, where the velvety dust was almost a foot deep. Standing some distance apart, they unbuckled their gun-belts and put them aside, and rolled up the sleeves of their shirts. Barden threw his hat aside, and Bill followed his act with his own hat.

Gwen strolled out to the hitch-rail and dropped her hand to her holster, wherein swung a pearl-handled six-shooter her father had given her a couple of years before. She eyed the two Box M men who had come from the saloon with Barden, and addressed them in a soft voice that did not fool them a bit:

"There's only two in this fight. Better remember that, or I may try some target practice!"

Men came running from up and down the street when news spread that a fight was imminent. Out in the street, Barden and Bill Hatchley advanced, measured each other, and began. In the first clash, each landed a blow.

Then they went at it, Barden with white-hot rage and Bill coolly and mechanically, taking advantage of the other's over-powering wrath, calculating every move.

Barden had his face marked first, and blood flowed down his cheek. The walks on either side of the street were crowded with spectators now. Gwen stood at the hitch-rail, her right hand still resting on her holster, and she watched both the fight and the Box M men.

For, from the first, Walt Barden was getting the worst of it, his insane rushes and wild swinging counting for little when Bill evaded the first and blocked the second. Slowly but surely, Bill was cutting down his foe, winding him, letting him tire himself out with his wild charges and heavy blows which hit nothing except air.

It was over at the end of five minutes. Barden began staggering and stumbling. His breathing was audible to those who watched from the walks. His legs would no longer support him. Bill Hatchley awaited the proper moment and landed a telling blow on the chin. Walt Barden sprawled in the dust.

"You Box M men carry him into the saloon and throw some water on him," Bill said, as he picked up his gun-belt and buckled it on.

He put on his hat after knocking off some of the dust, and strolled to the walk, rolling down his shirtsleeves.

"I'm ready to start for home soon as you get your stuff," he told Gwen.

Her heart was exulting as they rode home toward evening. She was sure of her man now. She had seen him in combat, and knew he could control himself when he fought. He was the kind of man a woman could depend on for protection.

AT LAST the rodeo was only a few days away. Gwen rehearsed Bill some more, while Jock Stuart, his foreman and the men prepared camping equipment and selected stock to take to Sage Center for the annual show.

Circle S contestants were practising and planning to bring many prizes back to the ranch. And Gwen, though she always won the event, did a lot of shooting as she prepared for the girls' marksmanship match. She put Spotty through his paces, too, for she was entered in the girls' fancy riding contest and the cowgirls' pony race.

The outfit was to leave early in the morning of the day before the rodeo opened. Two heavy wagons filled with tents and camp equipment and food went first, while the heavy chuckwagon followed. The contestants came along later, riding their pet ponies and leading some extra riding stock. Bill had remained behind to ride in with Gwen. They could easily catch up with the others who had gone ahead.

When they finally did start, they loped along easily through the bright sunny morning, happy to be side by side.

"Doggone! I wish I didn't have to do that playactin'," Bill said. "Makes a hombre feel foolish."

"You'll do all right, Bill. You make your voice quiver like I told you. Remember that you're telling your pony good-by forever— Oh, darn!"

"'Smatter?" he asked.

"I forgot my new jockey cap. Didn't put it in the trunk I sent with the wagon."

"I'll ride back and get it for you."

"You ride on and wait for me at the top of the next hill," she ordered. "I know where to find it, and another pair of boots, too. I always forget something like that."

She wheeled her pony and gave him the spurs, and Spotty carried her rapidly along the back trail. Bill rode on toward the crest of the hill and down the opposite side to where a long ledge of rock cast some shade. It was growing hot already.

Gwen got her cap and boots, and the housekeeper made them into a bundle. Gwen fastened the bundle to her saddle with a piece of rope. She started out again, made Spotty give her a little speed, and hurried to overtake Bill.

She sped along the town trail and came to the foot of the long hill, where she let Spotty take it easy during the ascent. But, before the crest of the hill was reached, Gwen changed her mind about that. Downwind came the sounds of gunfire—the snarl of rifles and the answering bark of a six-gun.

She ripped with the spurs, a sudden feeling of apprehension surging upon her. Spotty gave her what speed he could, and so she came to the top of the hill and stopped the pony behind a ledge to look down the opposite slope and ahead.

In the trail a short distance below, stood Bill Hatchley's bay pony with reins trailing. In a bunch of rocks at the side of the trail, a man was seeking cover and working his six-gun. Gwen could readily tell it was Bill.

From two positions, one on each side of the trail, men were using rifles and firing at Bill. Gwen could not make them out at first. But, as one changed position, she saw he was Walt Barden.

She had more than half expected that. Barden was the sort to take a mean revenge for the beating he had received in town. And he had several men working under him on the Box M who would gladly join him in a little drygulching.

Gwen's eyes flamed as she reached for her saddleboot and got out her rifle. She levered a shell into the chamber and surveyed the scene again. Bill's assailants were a long rifle shot from her.

She aimed carefully, and fired. She saw the bullet kick up a spurt of dust within six feet of Barden. She fired again rapidly and put her shot within a few feet of Barden's friend.

Her shots disconcerted them and made them dart rapidly to new positions. They could see her in silhouette against the sky, and there was no mistaking her spotted pony. It was the "sharp-shooter" girl who had entered the fight on the side of Bill Hatchley.

She yelled encouragement to Bill, but doubted whether he heard and understood, because of the stiff wind. His six-gun was talking again, as he placed bullets near the rocks behind which Barden and his friends were hiding.

IT WAS only a matter of seconds before Gwen heard the nasty whine of a bullet as it went past her, to strike a nearby rock and ricochet with an even nastier whine. One of the Box M men had fired at her! It was an attempt, she decided, to frighten her away. It was Walt Barden's intention, probably to leave Bill dead beside the trail. Afterward, they could say they knew nothing about it, or that Bill had attacked them from ambush and they had defended themselves. It would have to be the latter story, now that Gwen had appeared in time to see the fight.

That shot flying past her head made her almost berserk. She got a new shell in the chamber, and shifted her holster around a bit so she could get at her six-shooter quickly. She had shot coyotes from the saddle before, hadn't she?

She gave Spotty the spurs and yipped as she usually did when running down a coyote. The little pony went down the twisting trail, now in the open and now behind a protecting mass of rocks.

When she reached the level trail at the bottom of the hill, Gwen began firing. She saw Walt Barden's hat go flying from his head. She saw his partner leave shelter and make a wild run to reach his pony and get into saddle. Bill dropped him with a shot from his six-gun.

Gwen saw this out of the corner of her eye, and now gave all her attention to Walt Barden. Bill shouted at her as she went past his cover, but she paid him not the slightest bit of attention. Her blood was red hot at the thought of

what Barden had tried to do.

Barden left his protecting rock and tried to reach his pony, which was only a short distance from him. Gwen charged on. His pony swung around and protected him, and Barden got into his saddle. As he gathered up the reins and used his spurs, Gwen neatly placed a bullet through his shoulder and knocked him out of saddle and to the ground.

As she pulled up beside him, her rifle returned to the saddle boot and her six-shooter held ready, she heard pounding hoofs behind her, and turned an instant to see Bill coming on his pony. He jerked his mount to a stop.

"Watch that other hombre," Gwen yelled at him. "I'll 'tend to this one."

Bill swerved aside, to where Barden's companion was sprawled in the dirt. Gwen saw the man sitting up on the ground as Bill approached him, and guessed he was not mortally hurt. She gave her attention to Walt Barden.

Barden rolled over with difficulty and propped himself up on one elbow. His eyes were filled with flaming rage as he looked up at her.

"So you thought you'd drygulch Bill, did you?" Gwen asked him. "You should have made sure to get him at the first shot. I'm used to hunting coyotes from the saddle—remember? I reckon this finishes you in these parts, Mr. Barden, and your partner, too. I can see your Box M outfit coming down the other trail on their way to town for the rodeo. They'll ride right into this mess, Mr. Barden. Then, you won't be foreman of the Box M any more. And you'll either get patched up and roll your blankets and ride, or you'll go to jail. Make your choice, Mr. Barden."

BILL came riding back to her. He had taken the other wounded man's rifle and six-gun, and the man was sitting propped up against a rock.

"He's not bad hurt," Bill reported.

"Neither is this skunk, Bill. And here comes the Box M outfit with its crusty old owner riding in the buckboard ahead. We'll spin the yarn and then ride on to Sage Center and the rodeo grounds. Tonight, after we've put the stock up, you'll have to rehearse again."

"Aw, shucks!"

"You've got to do it, Bill. You've got to give a show for the Circle S—and me. Huh?"

He grinned. "I'll do that honey," he said.

SET ME A TASK

(Concluded from page 72)

genially at Everton. "You've got nerve, son. I reckon there's good Prince material in you. Too bad we ain't got any dragons around here. But how come you wasn't afraid I'd know you?"

"I was, a little," Everton said, edging toward Alicia.

Burroughs smiled again. "Reckon you ain't too much afraid of anything. What you need—"

"Is Alicia. Do I get her?"

"I reckon. No use of me objectin'. You've got Alicia, and I've got the white Herefords. And I reckon if you'da had to swim a couple of lakes of fire and climb a few glass mountains you'd have done that too. Just like the Princes in the old fairy tales always used to say—'Set me a task.' Well, you've got my blessing."

Three Great Western Novels—RANGE BEYOND THE LAW by William MacLeod Raine, COWBOY by Ross Santee and THE HERMIT OF THUNDER KING by Jackson Gregory—in the August issue of TRIPLE WESTERN, only 25c at all stands!

Tophands Don't Quit

By JACKSON COLE

Lance Tracy couldn't be frightened away from the outfit—especially when Nancy was there!

LANCE TRACY finished greasing the front axles of the ranch wagon, a buckboard, then lifted the heavy right-front wheel and put it back in place. He did it with the ease of a young man strong in body. He slipped on the washer and picked up the nut and the wrench.

"Shore does me good to see a man working so hard on a warm morning," said a dry voice behind Tracy. "It would never do to let Miss Nancy drive a wagon that squeaked a little."

Tracy turned slowly as he recognized the voice. It was strange, the way Ed Ware always succeeded in making him boil inwardly just by uttering a few casual words. The lean, sandy-haired man had always seemed friendly enough since he had joined the Anchor outfit two months ago, but there was something about his heavy attempts at humor that rubbed Lance Tracy the wrong way.

"The wheels on this wagon have needed greasing for some time," Tracy said, trying to keep the curtness out of his voice. "You used it to go to town day before yesterday and get supplies for the cook. You must have noticed it then."

"Come to think of it, I *did* hear some

"Hmph," said old Seth Bryant

musical sounds." Ware smiled his mechanical smile that never softened his hard, dark eyes. "But I didn't pay it much mind." His tone grew hard. "Do a good job—since it'll be one of your last before you quit the Anchor!"

"Who said I was quitting the outfit?" Tracy demanded in surprise, as he ran his free hand through his thick, dark hair. "First I've heard about it."

"*I* said so," said Ware, his right hand hooked on his gun-belt just above the Colt in the holster. "There isn't room for both of us on this ranch, Tracy. So you're leaving!"

"Just like that, eh?" said Tracy. "Suppose I told the boss you ordered me off the spread?"

"You won't," Ware said calmly. "In the first place, Seth Bryant expects his men to tend to their own troubles. And in the second place, if you did tell him I'd swear you were lying—just trying to make trouble for me."

Tracy thought swiftly before he spoke again. Ware was right. The owner of the Anchor was a stern, gray-bearded old man who expected the waddies in his outfit to fight their own battles, just as he had done all through the years. It was easy to visualize his contempt if Tracy went to him with the story of being ordered off the ranch by Ed Ware. To Seth Bryant, there would be no doubt that Lance Tracy was a coward.

IF WARE denied the whole thing, then the ranch owner would be sure that Tracy was a sneak, who was deliberately trying to get another cowboy in trouble. But what Tracy considered even worse, then—Bryant's granddaughter, Nancy, might feel the same way about it.

"What happens if I don't leave?" Tracy asked, glaring at Ware. "You going to shoot me down in cold blood?"

"I'm not that big a fool," said Ware. "Far as folks around here know, we aren't the best of friends but we get along all right. I aim to leave it that way. But you could have a bad accident. Just what, how or when, I'm not saying. But it might happen."

"You talk so much like a big bad wolf that you've got me shaking in my boots!" said Tracy. "Just why are you so anxious to get rid of me all of a sudden?"

"That's something you'll have to figger out," said Ware. "But if you are smart, you will have quit this job by tomorrow morning."

NEITHER man saw the pretty, blonde girl who came out of the big ranchhouse up on the hill and started toward them. She was dressed in a skirt, bright-colored shirt and boots, and was carrying a small black bag in one hand.

"Maybe I better make shore you know how much you scare me, Ware," Tracy said.

He dropped the wrench and leaped forward, smashing a hard right fist against Ware's chin and knocking the sandy-haired man to the ground.

Nancy Bryant uttered a cry and ran toward them as she saw what happened. Ware sat up, glanced over his shoulder and saw the girl approaching, and remained right where he had landed.

"Get up, and let's finish this!" Tracy said grimly, his fists clenched. "What's the matter, are you yellow?"

"Lance!" exclaimed Nancy as she reached them. "What's the matter? Why did you hit Ed and knock him down like that?"

"Just what I've been wondering, Miss Nancy," said Ware, as he got to his feet. "Me and Lance were standing here talking right friendlylike, when all of a sudden he gets mad and knocks me down."

"Is that what happened, Lance?" Nancy asked.

Tracy wasn't certain what to say. He couldn't tell her that he had hit Ware because the man had ordered him off the ranch. He doubted that she would believe him.

"I had a reason for hitting him," Tracy said, and even to him the explanation sounded childish. "That's all there is to it."

"What reason?" Nancy asked, and she turned to Ware. "What did you say to him just before he hit you, Ed?"

"Why, I was just kind of joking," said Ware. "I hope you won't mind, Miss Nancy, but I was kidding him about being in love with you—"

"In love with me!" interrupted

Nancy. "And that's why he knocked you down?"

"That's right," Ware said, his hard eyes fixed on the black bag the girl was carrying. He knew it was the bag that Seth Bryant often used in bringing the pay-roll money out to the ranch from the bank in town. "I told him he was foolish to hope you might be interested in him, and he socked me."

"I see," said Nancy coldly. "I have a few things to say to you, Mr. Tracy." She glared at Tracy, and then turned again to Ware. "Harness the bay team, please, Ed. Grandfather wants me to go to town and deposit the five thousand dollars in cash he got from the cattle dealer who bought that herd yesterday."

Tracy frowned and said nothing, as Ware hurried to the barn to get the matched bays. On the Anchor spread, the harness horses were usually kept in their stalls in the barn instead of out in the cavvy corral.

Nancy stood silently watching as Tracy picked up the wrench and tightened the nut on the wheel of the buckboard. Ware had disappeared inside the barn.

"Nothing has changed since last night, has it, Lance?" Nancy asked quietly. "You meant what you said then?"

"Of course!" Tracy said. He picked up the left-front wheel and put it on, and fastened the washer and nut into place. "I'll never change, Nancy." He pulled out the wooden sawhorse on which the front of the buckboard had been resting. "First I heard of that cattle deal your grandfather made."

Nancy looked at him and smiled.

"I'm not surprised," she said. "It happened on the spur of the moment. Some people might be easily tempted."

"You're right," Tracy said thoughtfully. "I never thought of that."

Ware came out of the barn leading the harnessed team of matched bays. He brought them over and the two men quickly hitched the team to the buckboard. Nancy climbed up onto the seat and Ware handed her the reins.

"I'm going to town now," Nancy said, her voice cold. "But when I get back and talk to grandfather, I suspect there will be one less cowboy working for this outfit."

She looked hard at Tracy as she finished speaking. Then she drove away, leaving the two men standing there. They silently watched her until she turned into the road leading to the little cowtown five miles away.

"You shore fixed things for me good, Ware," Tracy said. "I might as well be leaving now. I'll go tell the Old Man I'm quitting."

Ware didn't say anything as Tracy turned and walked slowly up toward the ranchhouse on the hill, but there was a mean smile on his face. Then he headed for the corral.

WHEN Tracy came down off the front steps of the ranchhouse ten minutes later, he saw Ware riding away, heading out toward the north forty. The sandy-haired man waved mockingly and then rode on.

"Looks like he is mighty pleased with himself," Tracy said to no one in particular. "If you ask me, even a good liar sometimes overdoes it."

Tracy went to the bunkhouse, got his guns and strapped them on. Then he hurried to the corral and roped and saddled the fastest horse in his string.

Twenty minutes later he was riding fast across the range, toward a rock-strewn spot that would bring him out onto the road leading from the Anchor to town, and about two miles from the ranch. He was hoping to reach there before Nancy passed in the buckboard.

When he arrived at the place where big boulders stood at the side of the road, he looked south. The buckboard had not loomed into view around the bend, and he was sure it had not passed as yet.

Tracy dismounted and left his horse ground-hitched and hidden back among the big rocks. For what seemed a long time, waited before the buckboard and team finally swung around the bend dragging the light ranch wagon after them. Nancy deftly handled the reins.

She slowed the team as Tracy stepped out into view from behind one of the boulders. He swung up onto the seat beside her and the buckboard kept right on moving along the road.

"A masked man held me up back there," Nancy said. "He made me hand over the bag to him. Then told me to drive on." She smiled. "He isn't going to be happy when he looks into that bag. The only things in it are some samples of dress goods that I was going to match with the cloth they have at the general store in Cottonwood!"

Tracy glanced back along the road. He was just in time to see a masked man ride out of the brush and start his horse racing after the buckboard. Despite the bandanna mask that hid the lower part of his face, there was something decidely familiar about the pursuing rider.

"He's coming," said Tracy. "Keep movin' fast, Nancy!"

Nancy urged the bays into a faster pace, but behind them the masked man was coming up fast. Tracy climbed over the seat of the buckboard and propped his back against it as he drew his guns. The masked man fired and the bullet whistled dangerously close to Tracy's head.

"Why he's actually firing at us!" Nancy cried. "I didn't think he would dare do that, Lance!"

The masked man was closer. Tracy fired a shot from his left-hand gun to warn the man to stay away. But the bandit sent a bullet tearing into the back of the seat of the buckboard, that just missed Nancy by inches.

"You asked for it, and you're going to get it," Tracy said grimly.

Both his guns roared almost at the same time. One bullet got the masked man in the right arm, the other in the left shoulder. He dropped his gun and slid out of the saddle, to sprawl there in the dust of the road.

Nancy glanced back, and then slowed the team as she saw what had happened. She wheeled the buckboard and drove back to the spot where the masked man was lying. Tracy thrust his guns back into the holsters and leaped out as the buckboard stopped.

He went to the wounded man and pulled away the bandanna mask. The face of Ed Ware glared up at him.

"I knew it!" said Tracy.

"So did I," said Nancy, as she sat gazing down at the wounded man. "Put him in the back of the buckboard, and we'll take him to town and turn him over to a doctor and the sheriff."

Tracy lifted the wounded man and placed him in the back of the buckboard. The sandy-haired cowboy said nothing, merely glared at Tracy and the girl.

"I knew you were lying when you said Lance knocked you down because you said he was in love with me," said Nancy. "It dawned on me that a liar might also be a crook, so I made up that story about taking the cash for grandfather's cattle deal to the bank. I wanted to see if you'd do anything about it."

"He fell for it, all right," said Tracy as he seated himself on the seat beside Nancy. "Tried to rob you of the money. And then he must have realized he was recognized, so he tried to kill us both."

Ed Ware merely glared at them as the buckboard continued on its way to town.

BY NIGHTFALL, the doctor had attended to Ware's wounds and the sheriff had placed him in jail. Lance Tracy and Nancy had returned to the ranch, stopping to pick up the horse Tracy had left ground-hitched and finding that Ware's riderless mount had headed back home. It was there when they reached the Anchor.

After supper, Tracy walked up to the ranchhouse. Nancy was with her grandfather. She had changed into a dress instead of the outfit she had been wearing that afternoon. At sight of Tracy, she rushed into his arms and he kissed her.

Humph!" said bearded old Seth Bryant as he watched. "Folks didn't act like that in public in my day, even if they were engaged!"

"Why, Grandpa," said Nancy turning to him as Tracy released her, "I hope you don't really mind."

"Not too much," the old man said, smiling. "Lance is a good boy, and from what you told me he shore don't scare easy." Bryant frowned then. "But what I don't see is why Ware was so anxious to have Lance quit the outfit, that he tried to frighten him away."

"That was because of me," said Nancy. "After Lance proposed last

(Concluded on page 97)

AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 7)

time. Fremont and Senator Bent made much o' Kit Carson, politically and otherwise, to advance the East's knowledge o' the West.

It was while in the employ o' Fremont that Kit saw the little Senorita Josefa Jaramillo in Taos. She was a Don's daughter, the belle o' Taos, and just fifteen years old. She was a strikingly beautiful brunette, precocious, and sweet. It was a love match between the two from the start.

After another expedition with Fremont, durin' which they had to fight the Sioux Indians at old Fort Laramie, Wyomin', Kit returned to Taos to marry Josefa.

Marriage Festival

This time Kit really had him a weddin'. He had embraced the Catholic faith, and they were married by the priest. After the ceremony, there ensued a night o' such festivity as only the Mexicans know how to put on.

There was elaborate feastin', then dancin' all night to the strains o' the gay Mexican fandango. Kit's trappers whooped it up and danced merrily. With liquor flowin' freely, a good time was had by all. Towards dawn Kit led his little bride to their new home near the Taos plaza.

Josefa proved to be a mighty good wife to Kit and a fine mother to their children. But Kit was so much in demand as a guide and scout that he was never allowed to remain long at home.

Once, while he was away, the Indians rose up and attacked the whites at Taos. They murdered many, includin' Governor Bent. Mrs. Bent and Josefa were obliged to stay in the room with dead bodies for several hours. The two women very ingeniously disguised theirselves as squaws and made their escape.

Kit now located a ranch home for hisself and Josefa. It was on the Rayado Creek in northeastern New Mexico. He settled down here to roam no more—he thought. He raised cattle, horses and mules. Mules were much in demand over all the Western trails. Kit started breedin' a superior brand o' mules. But he and Josefa were not to know much rest or home life together.

Fighting the Apaches

He was soon called to help the army chase Apaches. He went on many other trips as scout and guide to Fremont. He was a patriotic, public spirited citizen, and felt compelled to go when his country called. But soon as his duty was done he always hurried back home to Josefa.

Ranch life was not without its problems and difficulties. The Indians were constantly tryin' to run off his stock. He'd have to gather men—at one time it was government troops—chase the Indians and recapture his stock.

These Indian raids always occurred when Kit was away from home. He'd vow never to leave again. But I reckon he'd been a man o' the trails too long—had it in his blood. He continued to travel until he became too sick to make trips.

Josefa died before Kit. Left him with a large family of children on his hands. He lived a few years longer, but was sick, broke, and lonesome when he died at the age of fifty-nine years. It was his request that he be buried at Taos beside his Josefa.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

DID you ever hear of a dog that was interested in receiving mail? Well, I shore did. Happened when I was working for an outfit down in Texas one time. Jim Hardy, the foreman, had a collie named Shep that was a right smart dog.

"I don't believe Shep can write," Jim said to me one day. "At least I've never seen him try it—but I'm plumb certain he can read."

"That I must see," I said.

"All right—you watch," said Jim. "Buck rode into town to get the mail an hour or so ago. He should be back soon. You wait and see what happens."

The collie was lying in the sun near the big barn and not paying anybody much mind, but when Buck rode in with the mail Shep shore got interested. The dog trotted over and stood waiting and watching and wagging his tail slow and easy-like as the mail was handed out.

He looked like he was waiting for a letter for him all right.

Jim Hardy got four letters and a postal card. He glanced at them, and then held them out fan-like to the dog.

"Here's a letter for you, Shep," Jim said.

The collie trotted up, sniffed at the letters Jim was holding out to him, then grabbed

one letter in his teeth and started away with it.

"Just a minute," I said. "How do we know that letter really was for Shep. He might have grabbed any letter in yore hand, Jim. Reckon he figgered it was just something to play with."

"Come here, Shep," called Jim.

The dog trotted back, still carrying the letter in his mouth. He let Jim take it back from him, though. We all gathered around and looked at the envelope. That letter was addressed to "Shep Hardy."

"It is from my brother," Jim said. "He often writes to Shep." Jim handed the letter back to Shep. The dog grabbed it and disappeared behind the barn. "Probably gone to read his mail in private." Jim grinned.

I just stood there with the rest of the outfit looking plumb amazed and confused.

Wasn't until later that I learned that Jim's brother was a butcher, and figured it might have been the scent of meat on that letter which attracted the dog. But one day I was sitting on the grass in front of the bunkhouse reading a letter when Shep came up and stood there looking over my shoulder, and seeming right interested. You know—I never was shore whether that dog could read or not!

But speaking of letters, we are mighty pleased with all the nice mail we have been getting from members of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB. If there are some of you who haven't yet joined THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB, then get busy and do it right away. There are no dues or fees and it's a mighty fine club for those who like the West.

Reckon you all realize there just isn't room to print all the letters in one issue of the magazine and still have space for the stories, departments and all. But if you don't see your letter in the department this time, chances are that you are in the list of BRANDING FIRE CLUB MEMBERS or that your name will appear in some future issue.

Time we got looking over the letters we been receiving, so let's get started. Just to be shore to get in as many letters as possible we may cut yore letter down a little—but it's just to save space. And remember we are thanking all of you for writing and joining THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB. Now let's look at the mail:

I, like most of the readers of THRILLING RANCH STORIES, like it just the way it is. I enjoy most of all the "Hattie Pringle" stories, which are especially interesting. In this fast-changing world a person fond of the Western way of life can pick up THRILLING RANCH STORIES and be immediately satisfied with the very first sentence of every story. I, too, would like a lot of pen pals from any nation and of any nationality, people are all wonderful. I live in the sunny and beautiful land of Arizona and love it. I'm blond, 5 feet 8¾ inches tall and I'm 17 years old. I promise to answer all letters at once and also to send a picture. My hobbies are reading, writing, riding, movies, collecting stamps and postcards, and listening to the radio.

—*Madge O'Donnal.*

Box 13-A Campwood Rt,
Prescott, Arizona.

Just a line or two to say how much I enjoy THRILLING RANCH STORIES—it is a swell magazine. I love writing letters and making friends. I am a British housewife with two children, and I would like to hear very much from U. S. A. wives, especially those living in the West. I like to do most anything, and will promise to answer all letters I receive. I am 33 years old and would appreciate hearing from wives between 30 and 50 years old.

—*Mrs. Lillian Beddows.*

45 Cannock Rd, Chase Terrace,
Nr. Walsall, Staffs,
England.

My life is lonely, and I would like to have pen pals from all over. Am a patient in the hospital and find the days pretty long. I am 33 years old, 5 feet 6 inches tall, have blue eyes and brown hair. My favorite pastime is writing letters and exchanging snapshots. Will answer every letter, especially from those around my own age.

—*Jean Shaw.*

General Hospital Unit,
Glace Bay, Cape Breton,
Nova Scotia, Canada.

I have read every copy of THRILLING RANCH STORIES that I have been able to lay hands on, and think it is the finest Western magazine I have ever read. I'm 18 years old, tall, blond, have dark blue eyes, fair complexion, and weigh 134 pounds. My parents bought a large fruit farm just recently and I am boarding so I feel terribly lonely being away from home and with strangers. I have plenty of time for letter writing and would very much like to hear from some of you folks over there. I promise to answer all the letters I receive and exchange snaps not only of myself but also of some of South Africa's beauty spots.

—*Joan Trautmann.*

"Sparta," Ottery Rd, Wynberg, Cape Town,
South Africa.

I am 28 years old, have brown hair and hazel eyes and am 5 feet 5½ inches tall. I would like to hear from everybody all over the world. I work seven days a week and my hours keep me from doing much save write and read. I will exchange photos with anyone who writes to me if they wish.

—*Roger Gervais.*

Emhurst Hotel, Apt 10-B,
36th Street and Lexington Ave.,
New York, N. Y.

I am 23 years old, 5 feet 6 inches tall, weigh 140 pounds and have dark hair and eyes. French Canadian by birth and speak and write French. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps. So please have a heart and write a lonely Canadian in a strange country.

—*Francois Audet.*

General Delivery,
Seattle, Washington.

I am a red-haired widow, 40 years old, weigh 125 pounds, and am 5 feet 4 inches tall. I am fond of the outdoors, square dancing, and writing letters. Would like to hear from everyone, any age, especially cowboys and cowgirls and square dance callers.

—*V. O'Leary.*

Box 515, Palmer, N. Y.

I have just received my BRANDING FIRE CLUB certificate and I'm very glad to be a member of your swell club. I've been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for some time and find it a fine magazine. I am 15 years old, 5 feet tall and weigh 106 pounds. Have brown hair and eyes. I like all kinds of music, reading and dancing. Would like to hear from everyone who cares to write and will gladly exchange snapshots and postcards.

—*Miguel Angel Sanchez, Jr.*

130 South Parde Agutlera St.,
Mayaguez, Puerto Rico.

I am searching for pen pals who collect cowboy songs. I have almost three thousand of them and enjoy getting them. I would like to hear from others interested in old songs—especially songs of the West and hillbilly songs. Even if you don't have very many songs write to me, as I may be able to help you. If I could find someone with a typewriter, I might let them type some songs for me. It would be an easy way for someone to get the songs it has taken me years to collect. I am a housewife, 28 years old, 5 feet 2 inches tall, and I weigh 120 pounds. My other hobbies are fishing, roller skating, reading, sewing, and listening to the radio.

—*Mrs. Alice Schremmer.*

309 Fern Avenue,
Roseville, California.

How's about another THRILLING RANCH STORIES fan getting into the act and joining the BRANDING FIRE CLUB? Apparently only a few copies of your magazine are sent up here and I sure do miss out on a lot of editions. I've been with an airline three years here in Alaska. Have traveled around the Territory quite a lot. I'm 25 years old, 5 feet 7 inches tall and weigh 135 pounds. Blond hair and blue eyes. Hobbies? Well, let's say people, writing, and reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES. This is a wonderful country up here. Tops in hunting, fishing and beautiful scenery. So come on folks, won't you write? If any of you get up in this neck-of-the-woods I'll sure be glad to meet you.

—*Roy Buckles.*

Pacific Northern Airlines,
Anchorage, Alaska.

[Turn page]

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I am a lonely, fun-loving girl from the Missouri Ozarks. By lonely I mean just that, for I am the only girl at home. My mother is dead, and I am disabled by polio. I get about inside but must stifle longings to climb hills and tramp through the woods. I love to be driven about and enjoy our wonderful scenery. I'm a half-pint, 5 feet tall by stretching, weight about 95 pounds. Have blue eyes, dimples, and very fair skin, with light brown hair containing golden highlights. I don't allow my handicap to overshadow my personality. I like to laugh, even at myself. I am past twenty-five and have several hobbies, including a postcard collection, which compensates somewhat for the travel I long for. I am also trying to learn photo retouching, but I need letters to compensate for the lack of contact with people. I'll answer all I can.

—*Jewell Cooper.*

Star Route, Flemington, Mo.

Will anyone who knows Charles J. Rizzo please contact me. I know for certain that a Larry Winters was a close friend of Charles Rizzo. If Larry Winters reads this I will be grateful if he will get in touch with me. This is very important. I must contact Mr. Rizzo at once, so will anyone who knows of his recent address and present whereabouts please notify!

—*Miss Edna Drumm.*

Prairie City, Oregon.

I am 5 feet 6½ inches tall, weigh 142 pounds (where, oh, where, has my girlish figure gone). I am French, American-born, and a nurse. I play the piano and the guitar. My parents are dead. I collect match-folders—no matches in them—and love to write letters. Any age, anyone, anywhere, I'll write, so please fill my mail box.

—*Joy Carpenter.*

1411 Race Street,
Kalamazoo, 30, Michigan.

Looks like that's about all the letters for this time, but we shore are thanking everybody for writing, and we'll be quoting from more of your fine letters in the next issue. And here is a list of some folks who are new members of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB:

Mr. Wilfred Tobias, Tomahawk, Wisconsin.
Harry H. Dintelman, 98 W. 154th St., Harvey, Ill.
Marjorie Gaudet, St. Nicholas, Prince Edward Island, Canada
Dorothy Gaudet, St. Nicholas, Prince Edward Island, Canada
Mrs. Helene D. Chessell, 5700 W. Chicago Ave., Chicago, 51, Ill.
Edward McDermott, South Louisville 8, Kentucky.
Sgt. J. O'Connor, Tank Company, 9th Infantry Regiment, Fort Lewis, Washington.
Elsie Mullins, Route 1, Afton, Texas.
Geneva Harvey, Box 92, Afton, Texas.
Lillian Lee Tate, P. O. Box 656, San Diego 7, California.
Mrs. F. C. McKean, General Delivery, Hammond, La.
Winnie Corey, R. R. 2, Leamington, Ont., Canada.
Donnie Joy Curry, 4409 N. B St., Tampa, 6, Fla.
Hilda Harder, Colroso, Man., Canada
Ruth Ann Aberts, Box 238, Route 1, Baltimore, Maryland
Joan Lawrence, 34 Park St., Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
Nathaniel Gouge, General Delivery, Morganton, N. C.
Clara Minor, Route 4, Mouston, Wisconsin.
Betty Calwonsen, 71 Mercer Street, Phillipsburg, N. J.
Bonnie Wessel, 3068 Belvedere Blvd., Omaha, 11, Nebr.

Helen Swetitch, R. R. 3, Kelowna, B. C., Canada.
Mary Jo Hutchinson, Box 92, Keller, Virginia.
Raymond E. House, 23 Bailey Street, St. Catherines, Ontario, Canada
Eloise Farmer, Route A, Box 34, Molino, Fla.
Janet Taylor, 3220 Orange Street, National City, California.
Shirley Landry, 4544 Baton Rouge Ave., Baton Rouge, La
Mrs. Mae Hefferon, 2716A S. 7th St., St. Louis, Mo
Cpl. LeRoy B. Heacock, 36 Comm. Sqdn., A. P. O. 208, c/o P M., New York, N. Y.
Yvonne Pivert, Dimsdale, Alberta, Canada
Helen Praul, 618 Georges Lane, Ardmore, Penna
Tatsie Webb, 1806 Linwood Blvd., Oklahoma City, Okla
Mr. F. Snyder, 1500 E. 118 St., Cleveland, Ohio.
John Arstail, Mullingar, Sask., Canada
Shirely Ann Budge, Box 365, Dresden, Ohio.
Chester Godzalinski, 3915 South 7 Street, Milwaukee, 7, Wisc.
Evelyn Archer, Box 83, Cridersville, Ohio.
Delores Acton, Vichy, Mo.
Leslie N. Jenne, Rt. 2, Box 279, Newberg, Oregon.
Frances Guffy, Boise, Idaho
Leo Morin, 2905 N. Oracle Rd., Tucson, Arizona
Mary Lou Woosley, General Delivery, Tullahoma, Tenn.
James Woosley, General Delivery, Tullahoma, Tenn.
Caroline Allen, Columbia Falls, Maine.
Delma Lee Underwood, Route 5, Box 512, Charleston, West Virginia.
Lillian Schaefer, Fredericksburg, Texas
Una Kilgore, Route 1, Sidney, Texas.
Mrs. Sallie Rice, 613 So. College Avenue, Salem, Ill.
Wilma Robertson, Herrick, Ill.
Bert Douglas, 1251 E. 59 Pl., Los Angeles, 1, Calif.
Dorothy H. Campbell, 605-6th St., Monett, Mo
Kate Bell, R. F. D., Reform, Alabama.
Mildred Meliott, R. F. D. 2, Clarington, Ohio.
Ruby Brown, 32 Lorne Ave., Box 999, Collingwood, Ontario, Canada.
Norma Hirsch, c/o Harvey Lake, R. R. 2, Townline, Bancroft, Ont., Canada.
Dorothy Grant, P. O Box 51, Churchland, Va
Willie Rollins, 1491 Morris Street, Wayne, Michigan.
Grace Ellen Owen, Ranfurly, Alberta, Canada.
Donna Lindsey, Rt. 1, Box 512, Porterville, Calif.
Helen Eubanks, Rt. 2, Bluffton, Ga
Althy Clowers, Kensett, Ark.
Edgar Fitzpatrick, Bishop, Calif
Gene White, Rt. 1, Box 212, Clover, S. C.
Edna Emerick, 507 W. 4th Street, Beardstown, Ill.
Lenual Whetson, Flint, 8, Michigan.
Mrs. Arthur O. Nelson, Jr., 1703 Hughitt Avenue, Superior, Wis.
Norma Jean Pierson Evening Shade, Ark., R R 1.
Mary A. Lynch, 110 St. Botolph Street, Boston, Mass.
Joy Teski, Buckingham, Quebec, Canada
Lila Baldwin, 3515 6th Avenue, Chattanooga, Tenn.
Geneva Chandler, 3515 6th Avenue, Chattanooga, Tenn
Donald L. Chiles, Route 1, Deepwater, Mo.

Yes, sir, it shore is great to hear from that grand new bunch of BRANDING FIRE CLUB MEMBERS, and of course we are always plumb delighted when more folks join the club—so how about you doing just that? Everybody please address all yore letters and postcards to The Editor, THRILLING RANCH STORIES, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thank you!

OUR NEXT ISSUE

SOMETIMES I get ideas that strike me afterwards as being plumb loco—such as the idea I had this morning of bringing my old saddle to the office. Might not have been so bad if I'd thought about it and let it go at

[Turn page]

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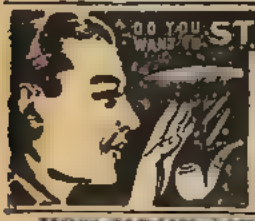

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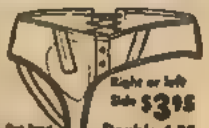

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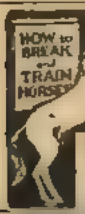

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that. But not me—I brought the saddle along.

In some mad, impulsive moment I figured the saddle would be more comfortable than the chair at my desk—which had always suited me fine up to then. So I lugged the saddle in, to the amazement of one and everybody. I found a wooden saw horse, placed the saddle on that and drew it up to the desk. Then I swung into leather, but seeing as the saddle was made for the back of a horse, and not that wooden contraption, it was about as safe as riding on the neck of a giraffe.

"Now I've seen everything, and don't believe half of it," said the voice of the boss behind me. "Careful of that roan, Tex. He looks skittish."

I tried to twist around to take a good look at the boss, and that did it. The saddle slid off that saw horse and I landed on the floor with a thud that was something to admire. I scrambled to my feet looking sheepish, and I shore have the face for it.

"I'm glad you finished your ride," said the boss. "Have you ever heard of a magazine called THRILLING RANCH STORIES?"

"Have I heard of it," I said, putting the saddle and the saw horse away. "Why, it's a humdinger!"

"Good," the boss said. "Then words like stories, next issue, may have some meaning to you, Tex."

"You mean you want me to tell the readers about the collection of grand stories we have lined up for the next issue?" I said.

"Right," said the boss. "Suppose you get back on your horse and do just that."

"Never mind the horse," I said quickly. "I think better when I'm not in the saddle. I just found that out."

He smiled and went away from there and I decided I had better do like he said, which same I am going to do right now, and that's telling you all about the stories in the next issue.

First is GIRL BOSS OF THE TUMBLING Y, a fascianting novelet by Nels Leroy Jorgensen. Just listen—

When the quarrel broke out Chris Donovan was fully aware of the presence of Hugh Lawlor, Lawlor who rated somehow the title of captain due to his post as Indian agent for the Talos Reservation far beyond town. Ignoring the presence of the Indian agent in the rough trail-drive camp a distance outside Burning Wells, his one thought the cattle, Chris Donovan faced Dolf Williamson.

"One way and one way only to do the job,

Dolf," Donovan said. "Drive this bunch straight through and forget the chances of a stampede. We leave these cows here overnight and there'll be more than a stampede by morning. They'll be scattered from one end of the country to the other. We got to take 'em through!"

"We leave 'em where they are," Dolf Williamson said stonily. "They ain't goin' through tonight, Chris, not while it's my job to see they're delivered they ain't. If you want—"

The girl came into the scene then, a girl almost as tall as Donovan, with lights from the small fires catching glints in her bronze hair where it escaped from under the high-crowned Stetson she wore. She was dressed for riding, but no costume could conceal the trim slimness of her, the grace of her, or her beauty. She slapped gloves together and while the trail crew watched she spoke.

"What's the argument, Dolf?" she said to Williamson.

"Donovan wants to push this whole herd through to the Reservation holding grounds—no stops—tonight!" Williamson said. "I say

[Turn page]

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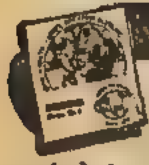

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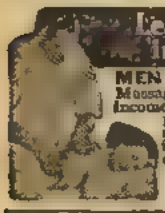

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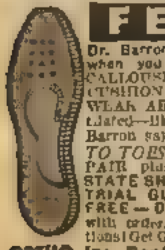

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—we been driving for three days now and if we push 'em through to be checked by morning they'll of lost so much weight we won't get our dinero for 'em."

"Not as much maybe," Donovan said. "But they'll be delivered."

"It's my idea to leave the herd here," Captain Lawlor put in smoothly. "You can make a swing around Burning Wells if you make an early start in the morning and be at the Reservation by tomorrow afternoon. Your beef is thin now," he added critically. "I rode out to see what you were going to do. Of course if the herd isn't there on time your contract is forfeit. Still there seems no reason to believe it will be."

His voice drifted away and the girl turned to the newcomer, Donovan, her eyes cool. Donovan had come on as a trail boss, Williamson was still her manager and foreman of the outfit.

"And why do you want to drive through right now?" Jeanne Cartier asked the new man. "Afraid?"

He faced her and there was a grimness about his straight mouth. He nodded. "Yes," he said softly. "Afraid."

Those listening looked at the twin thonged guns hanging so low, their scarred holsters, and they could see his eyes, and no one thought to laugh. They waited for the girl to speak.

"Of what?" she said.

"Of this—if we don't drive through we'll be raided and the beef scattered. I'm not afraid of rustlers, I'm afraid of what they aim to do to your herd to prevent delivery. If we don't go through there'll be nothing to deliver at the Reservation tomorrow. Bart Lonergan and his boys'll see to that! What they don't run off will be scattered all over the *malpais* south."

"That's your opinion, Mr.—er—Donovan?"

"That's my opinion, Miss—Cartier."

Across the dull fires they faced each other, both young, both arrogant. One the girl who now owned the last remnants of the once-powerful cattle empire known as the Tumbling Y, the other an unknown, except for Williamson's knowledge of him.

There were more words and then Jeanne Cartier left the decision up to Dolf Williamson, stating that he was still manager, and then the girl went to her tent. . . .

The decision, and its astonishing results, are revealed in GIRL BOSS OF THE TUMBLING Y—a novelet that packs plenty of

suspense, romance and action!

Next comes RIDE A TWISTED TRAIL, a tensely dramatic novelet by Melvin Gable. This story takes us to the town of Comstock, where gunfighting is a familiar pastime.

Howard Janney, tethering his roan in front of the Comstock post office one day, ducked instinctively as a stray bullet shattered the street lamp overhead. A fancy black carriage drawn by a pair of satiny bays pulled up alongside Janney.

The horses reared up nervously as another shot rent the air.

From the rear seat of the rig a distinguished looking man in a Prince Albert coat and stove-pipe hat thrust his head out to determine the source of the shooting. The austere, yet aristocratic face of a woman in her late forties appeared in the window beside him. "Tell Sam to whip up the team, Mark. We're late as it is," she said with evident annoyance.

"I don't think it would be safe to go ahead just yet," her companion rejoined, pulling in his head.

Another shot blasted out, followed by a rousing rebel yell. Janney smiled as he perceived the cause of the shooting. Half a block away, a lone and obviously gay cowboy stood in the middle of the street. A whisky bottle was waved aloft in one hand while the other brandished a six-shooter.

"Yipee! I'm a moss-backed Longhorn and I've got this town treed," the cowboy shouted gleefully.

The woman in the carriage looked out at Janney irritably. "You're wearing a gun. Can't you do something to stop him?"

Janney eyed her tolerantly. "Not me, Ma'am. T'ain't none of my affair. I'm a stranger to this town. I just rode in and I'm not aiming to get a bullet in my hide the first night. That's a job for your marshal."

Another rebel yell drew their attention back to the cowboy. He had spotted the carriage. Tossing the bottle into the street, he started toward it with unsteady strides.

The man in the Prince Albert opened the carriage door and stepped down. A Reming-

[Turn page]

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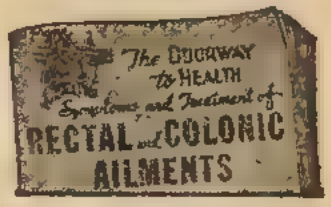

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ton .41 caliber "Double Derringer" glinted in his hand.

"Be careful, Mark," the woman urged.

"It's Lew Bristow," Mark responded contemptuously. "This isn't the first time he's gone on a spree, but I'm going to make certain it's his last." Janney started at the mention of the cowboy's name.

When he was a scant dozen feet from the carriage, Bristow halted, swaying slightly on his feet. He pointed to Mark.

"Come outa there, dude," he said thickly. "I wanna see how you can dance."

Mark started to bring up his Derringer. Janney stepped over quickly and seized Mark's wrist.

"There's no need for gunplay. I can handle him."

Brushing past Mark, he walked slowly toward Bristow.

"Hold it or I'll put a slug through you," the cowboy snarled, thrusting his six-shooter forward.

"Don't you remember me, Lew?" Janney asked, halting.

Bristow's bloodshot eyes glared at him with a mixture of derision and skepticism. "I don't know you, hombre, but mebbe you can dance just as good as the dude. We'll see." Grinning wolfishly he triggered a shot

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into the ground close to Janney's toes. "Dance, I said."

Janney itched to reach for his gun but resisted the impulse. "Think hard, Law. You and I once herded Huber's Longhorns into Dodge."

Bristow pulled the trigger again. This time the hammer clicked on an empty cartridge. Janney lunged at him. Cursing, Bristow clubbed his gun at Janney's head. Janney blocked the blow with his left forearm and drove his right fist into the cowboy's stomach. He struck him again in the face as the cowboy doubled over. The blow spun Bristow half around. The breath went out of him in a wheezing gasp and he sprawled face down in the street.

That was how Janney met Mark Lannon, manager of the town bank, and Mrs. Hayden, a widow whose husband owned the bank. She later offered Janney a job as marshal of the town. What happens after Janney takes the job makes RIDE A TWISTED TRAIL a novelet you will enjoy and remember!

Also in the next issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES will be GALLOWS BRIDE OF FRISCO by Harold Preece, a fascinating true story of a famous woman of the West, plus many carefully selected short stories and other interesting features, all of them filled with the romance and drama of the rangeland. A fiction feast for one and all. See you then, folks!

—TEX BROWN.

TOPHANDS DON'T QUIT

(Concluded from page 86)

night and I accepted, I happened to see Ed Ware later in the evening. Ware told me he was in love with me, and I told him I was sorry but I was in love with someone else. I didn't tell him Lance and I were engaged, because we wanted to tell you about that before anyone else knew, Grandpa."

"And we did that last night," said Tracy. "Evidently Ware figgered if he could bluff me into quitting the outfit, he would have a better chance with Nancy. But he turned out to be a crook when Nancy forced his hand." He looked at the girl adoringly. "I'm shore marrying a smart girl!"

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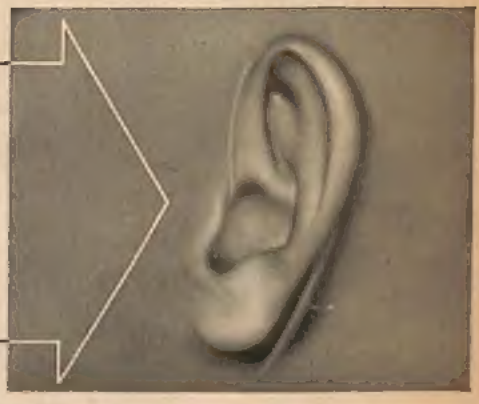

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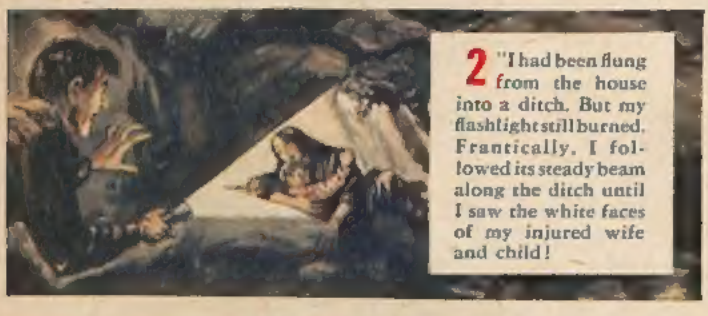

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